

NATIONAL CHAMPIONS

COMMEMORATIVE ISSUE

Sports Illustrated

PRESENTS

ALABAMA

ROLL TIDE

THE SEASON IN PICTURES

THE HISTORY

ALL-TIME TEAM, TEN FOR THE AGES,
TALE OF THE TAPE

THE HEROES

DERRICK HENRY, THE FRONT SEVEN

COVER THREE

Reggie Ragland, Derrick Henry and Jake Coker

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Photographs by

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ONE FOR THE THUMB

Nick Saban won his fifth national title, which puts him behind only Bear Bryant's six.

Photograph by

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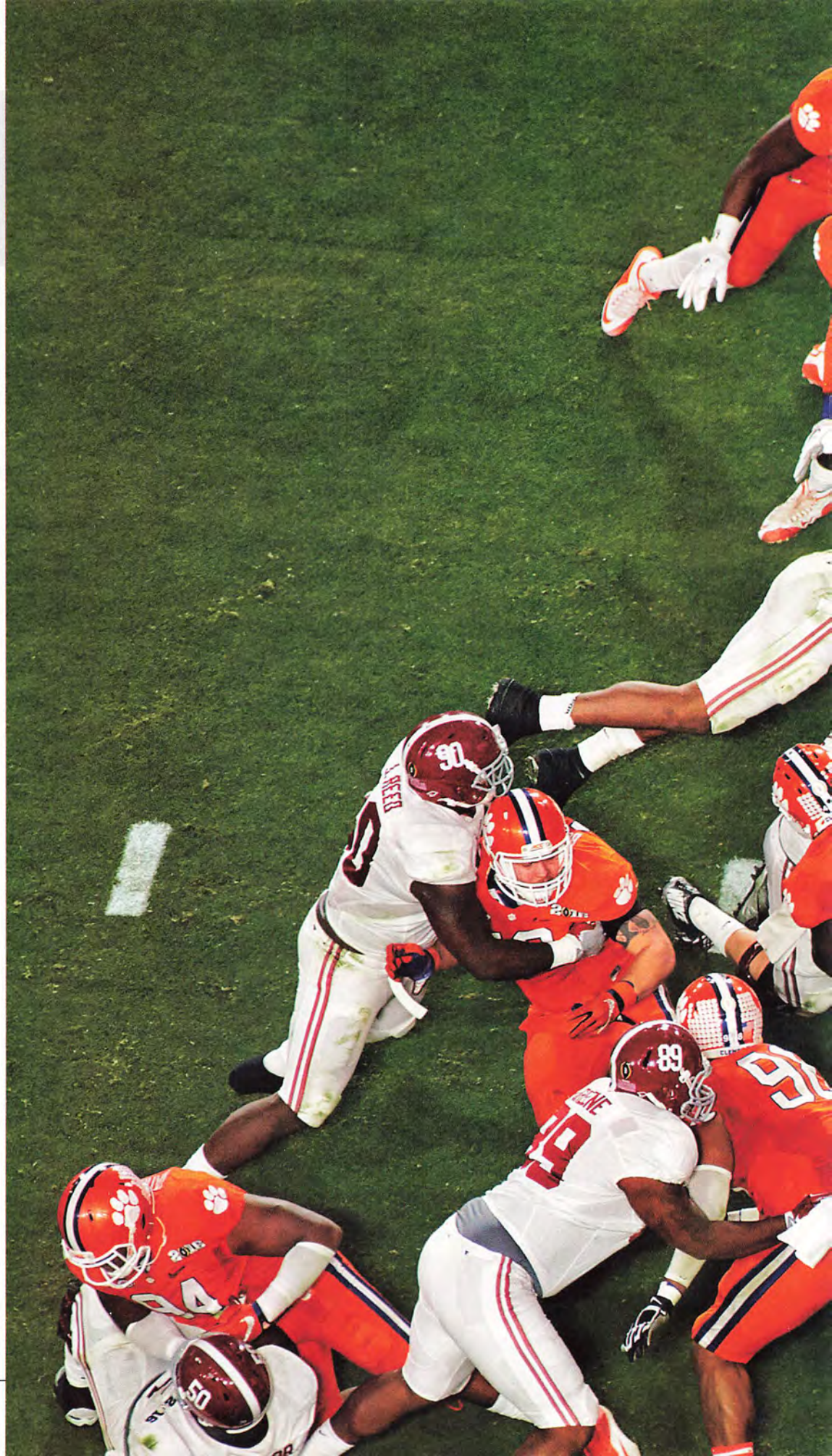


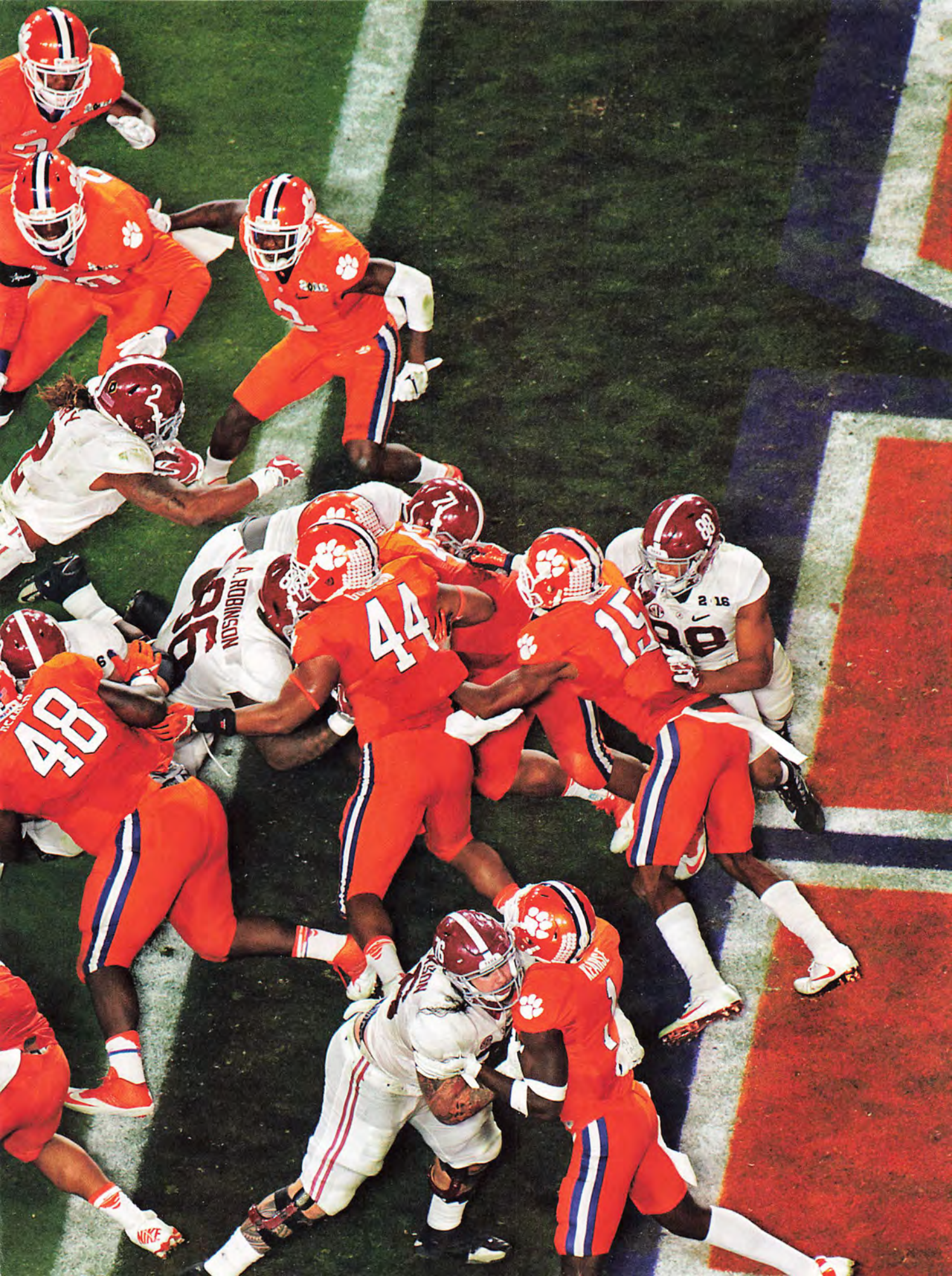
LEADING OFF

OVER THE TOP

Photographer Nils Nilsen had the best seat in the house at the College Football Championship—though he rarely sat. Roaming the catwalks above the field, Nilsen had a bird's-eye view of plays such as Derrick Henry's one-yard touchdown run in the second quarter. He used handheld and remote cameras to capture these three unique images.

Photographs by
Nils Nilsen
For Sports
Illustrated







LEADING OFF

UNCOVERED

Tight end O.J. Howard had plenty of room to run to pay dirt on this 51-yard, fourth-quarter reception that put Alabama up 31-24.

Howard, a junior, finished with five receptions for 208 yards, including a 53-yard touchdown in the third quarter, and was named offensive MVP of the game.



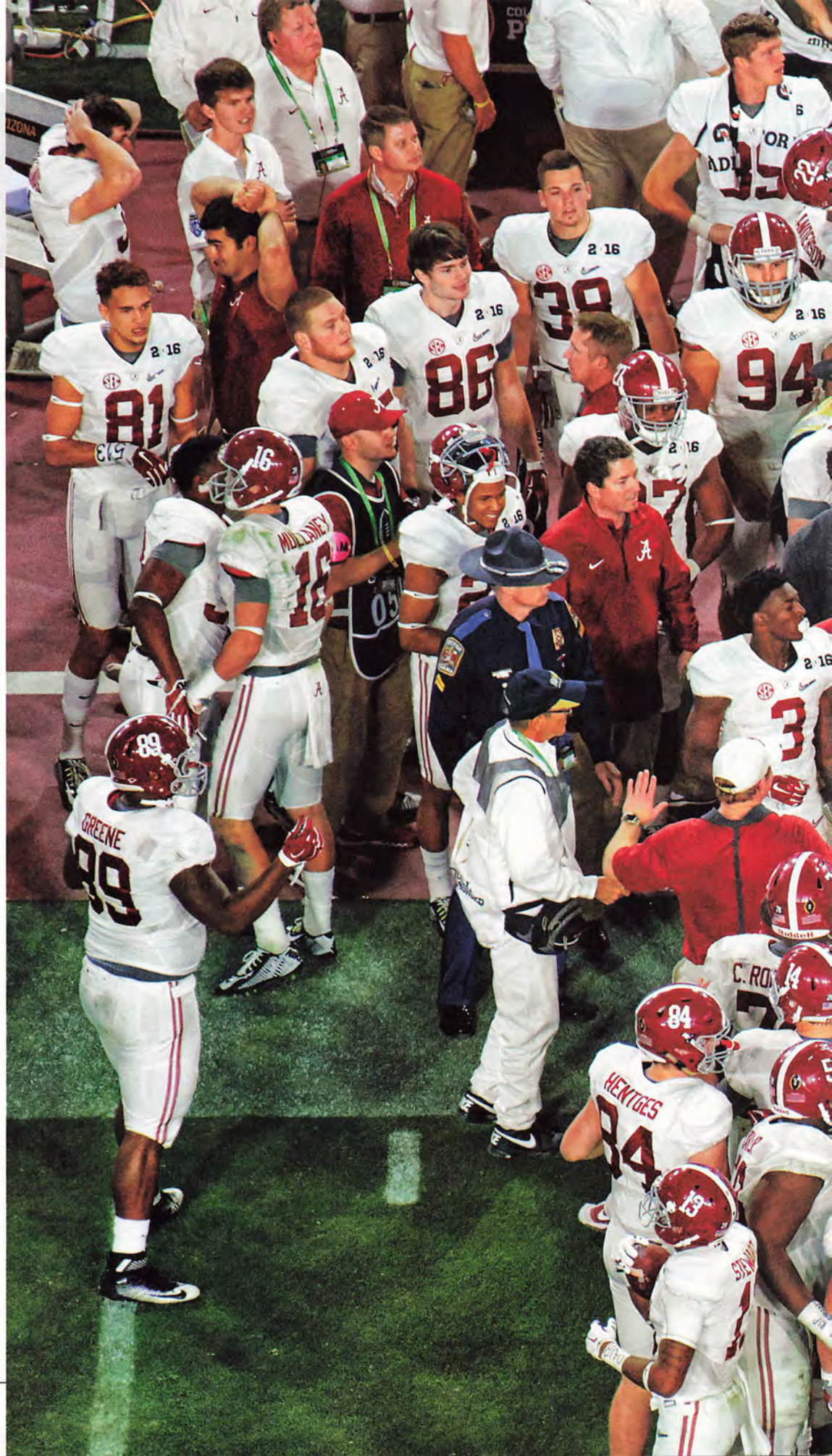




LEADING OFF

TIDAL WAVE

Senior tight end Ty Flounoy-Smith (83) had only three receptions all season, but he dished it out on championship Monday. With help from running backs Bo Scarbrough and Derrick Henry, Flounoy-Smith doused coach Nick Saban in a crimson Gatorade shower as soon as Alabama's victory was in hand.







WHY WE LOVE THE PLAYOFF

For Crimson Tide fans, the answer is obvious. But even for nonchampions, the format has vastly improved the postseason without diminishing the regular season. And it's only Year Two

BY MICHAEL ROSENBERG

WE AT SPORTS ILLUSTRATED apologize for being presumptuous in our planning for this issue. We had slotted this space for an old tradition, a column headlined, "How to Fix College Football's Broken System for Determining a Champion." It was going to feature some appropriate outrage, some inappropriate outrage, and a few lines that were nearly funny when we first printed them in 1973.

But now we have a problem:

This year, the College Football Playoff worked.

We do not just say this because Alabama won its fourth national championship of the Nick Saban era, completing a simple equation: best team = champion. We say it because the two most worthy teams, Alabama and Clemson, played in the championship game, and the four most worthy teams (add Michigan State and Oklahoma) played in the Playoff . . . and the regular season was not diluted a bit.

We're still not used to this. We are used to chaos, illogical arguments and a national championship determined, in part, by a voter who hasn't watched a game in

six years and ranked teams by the raw strength of their mascots.

We can forget all that now. After two years in the Playoff neighborhood, we're ready to sign a long-term lease. The 2015 season solidified the Playoff as the ideal solution to college football's centurylong conundrum: It provides a logical format for determining a national champion while preserving the best regular season in sports.

That last part, about the regular season, is critical. It's why a sizable minority of college football fans used to be wary of a playoff. The beauty of college football has always been its end-to-end tension. The Yankees can't get knocked out of the playoffs in April. NFL teams can lose their first two games and survive. NBA teams don't get eliminated from the playoffs before Christmas (except in Philadelphia, but that's another story). But college football teams have always known that, from the opening kickoff, their season was on the line.

The Playoff improves the end of the season without ruining the beginning. It was great that the Big Ten championship game between Iowa and Michigan State was a de facto Playoff elimination game, but that did not diminish all the games



that led up to it. It was cool that Clemson had to worry about its playoff berth when it played North Carolina in the ACC championship game. But Clemson also had to worry about its playoff berth when it held off Notre Dame on Oct. 3.

If you look back, there were de facto elimination games all season. Even games that didn't seem like a huge deal at the time, like Stanford's loss at Northwestern on Sept. 5, had huge implications in November.

The Playoff has actually improved college football. Admittedly, the sport's bureaucrats could have improved upon the Bowl Championship Series with a dartboard and a bottle of bourbon. But still. The four-team playoff eliminates a lot of the anger and replaces it with common sense. The BCS, like the poll system before it, overemphasized the achievement of going undefeated—for years, teams were better off beating Southeast Western North Dakota State than losing to Florida State by a field goal. Naturally, teams responded by softening their nonconference



ULTIMATE GOAL

By defeating Clemson at University of Phoenix Stadium, the Tide completed a simple—and satisfying—equation to the delight of college football fans.

BCS was a political process. No wonder coaches acted like politicians.

The Playoff doesn't work like that. The committee is small and not susceptible to public lobbying. And the criteria are more clearly defined, but with some flexibility for the committee to exercise common sense.

In the coming years, there will be a push for an eight-team playoff, because we like to make things bigger and better, even when bigger isn't better. Four teams is right. A four-team playoff makes it virtually impossible to clinch a bid until you have one game left. Most teams are not locks until they have won their final game. Oklahoma needed to beat Oklahoma State in its finale. Alabama needed to beat Florida in the SEC championship game. Clemson had to beat North Carolina in the ACC title game. This is how it should be. You often hear people praise the Playoff with the caveat that "it's not perfect," as though that's an insult. Most things in life are not perfect.

Sure, there are ways we would improve upon it. The committee releases rankings too early in the season, which starts the second-guessing too early. The semifinal games should be on New Year's Day instead of New Year's Eve—and really, it would be great if they were in December, and the title game was on New Year's Day.

But these are side issues. They should not distract us from the main one: The Playoff provides a great answer to a difficult question.

College football already had the best regular season in sports. Now you can argue that it has the best postseason too. And it ended with the most deserving team, Alabama, winning the championship. □

schedules. Nobody wanted to risk a loss. The Playoff committee takes a different approach. Strength of schedule is heavily weighted, and schools are adapting by scheduling better matchups.

The Playoff committee favors conference champions, so conference championships matter more than they have in years. In Year One of the Playoff, the principle was poorly applied: The committee saw a logjam atop the Big 12, took that league's refusal to anoint a single champion literally, and left everybody out. But conference championships should matter. They have always been part of the fabric of college football—in a regional sport, it's important to win your region. And in a sport with more than 100 teams but only 12 regular-season games, we need some tiebreakers that are not spit out by a computer.

A formula might tell you that Ohio State was one of the best teams in the country this year. You might believe that yourself, even if you don't live in Ohio. But the Buckeyes lost the Big Ten's East Division fair and square.

When Michigan State lined up to kick a game-winning field goal in Columbus in November, everybody understood the stakes.

The old BCS computer rankings frequently disregarded the factors that should have mattered most. Those rankings are now called the College Football Computer Composite, and in the final week of the season, they ranked Ohio State fourth—ahead of Michigan State. The computers didn't care that Michigan State beat Ohio State in Columbus with its backup quarterback and won the division they share. But reasonable people do.

THE PLAYOFF also eliminated another infuriating aspect of the BCS: People were always complaining about it. Yes, this includes those of us in the media. But the people involved complained about it. Coaches lobbied like they were angling for government funding. Athletic directors argued publicly and shamelessly, and they did it for a very simple reason: It worked. The

THE SEASON

Carried by the workhorse efforts of college football's top at stopping the run—the Tide rolled to the SEC West title



DREAM RENEWED

The Tide's championship hopes hung in the balance on Oct. 24 until a late surge secured a 19–14 win over Tennessee—Bama's narrowest margin of victory in 2015.

Photograph by
Kevin C. Cox
Getty Images

IN PICTURES

*player—and by the nation's best defense
for the 11th time* | BY JEREMY FUCHS





SEPT. 6, ARLINGTON

ALABAMA 35

WISCONSIN 17

Safety Eddie Jackson's pick sealed an opening-night victory over the 20th-ranked Badgers, the first of six nonconference wins.

Photograph by
Greg Nelson
For Sports Illustrated



SEPT. 12, TUSCALOOSA
**ALABAMA 37, MIDDLE
TENNESSEE STATE 10**

*Minkah Fitzpatrick
celebrated a forced
fumble by fellow
freshman Marlon
Humphrey—one of
five Blue Raiders'
turnovers.*

Photograph by
Marvin Gentry
USA Today Sports





SEPT. 19, TUSCALOOSA

OLE MISS 43

ALABAMA 37

*Junior tight end
O.J. Howard
caught four balls for
70 yards, but the Tide
came up short against
the Rebels for the
second year in a row.*

Photograph by
Michael Chang
For Sports Illustrated





SEPT. 26, TUSCALOOSA

ALABAMA 34

LOUISIANA-MONROE 0

Nearly a year after breaking his left leg, running back Kenyan Drake rushed for a team-high 65 yards; the Tide defense allowed just 92.

Photograph by
Vasha Hunt
AL.com/Landov





OCT. 3, ATHENS

ALABAMA 38

GEORGIA 10

Rushing for 148 yards, Derrick Henry blasted through the Bulldogs—and every other opponent—en route to winning the Heisman Trophy.

Photograph by
Pouya Dianat
For Sports Illustrated



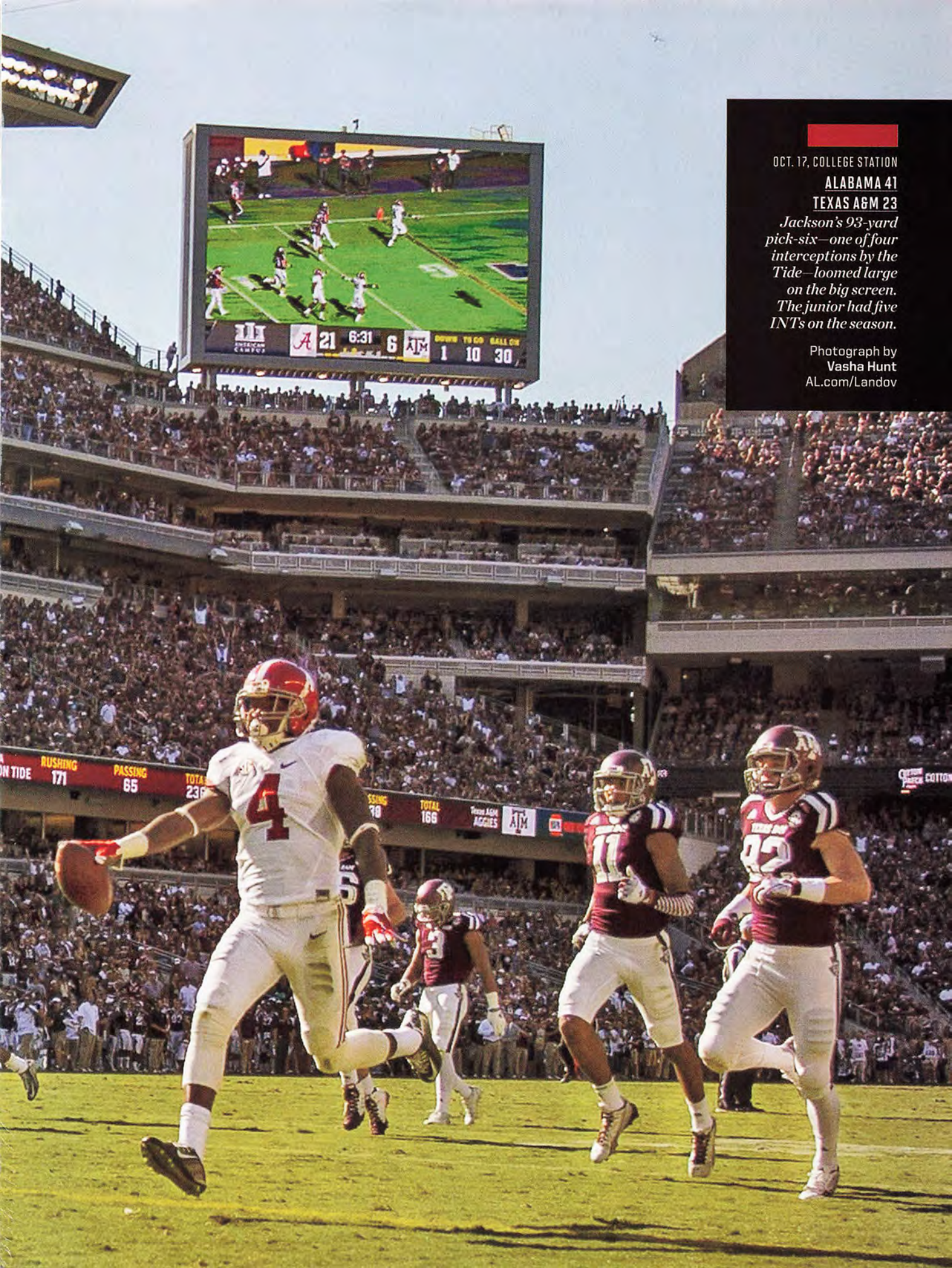
OCT. 10, TUSCALOOSA

ALABAMA 27

ARKANSAS 14

Senior QB Jake Coker picked apart the Razorbacks for 262 yards and two TDs, including an 81-yard bomb in the third quarter.

Photograph by
Vasha Hunt
AL.com/Landov



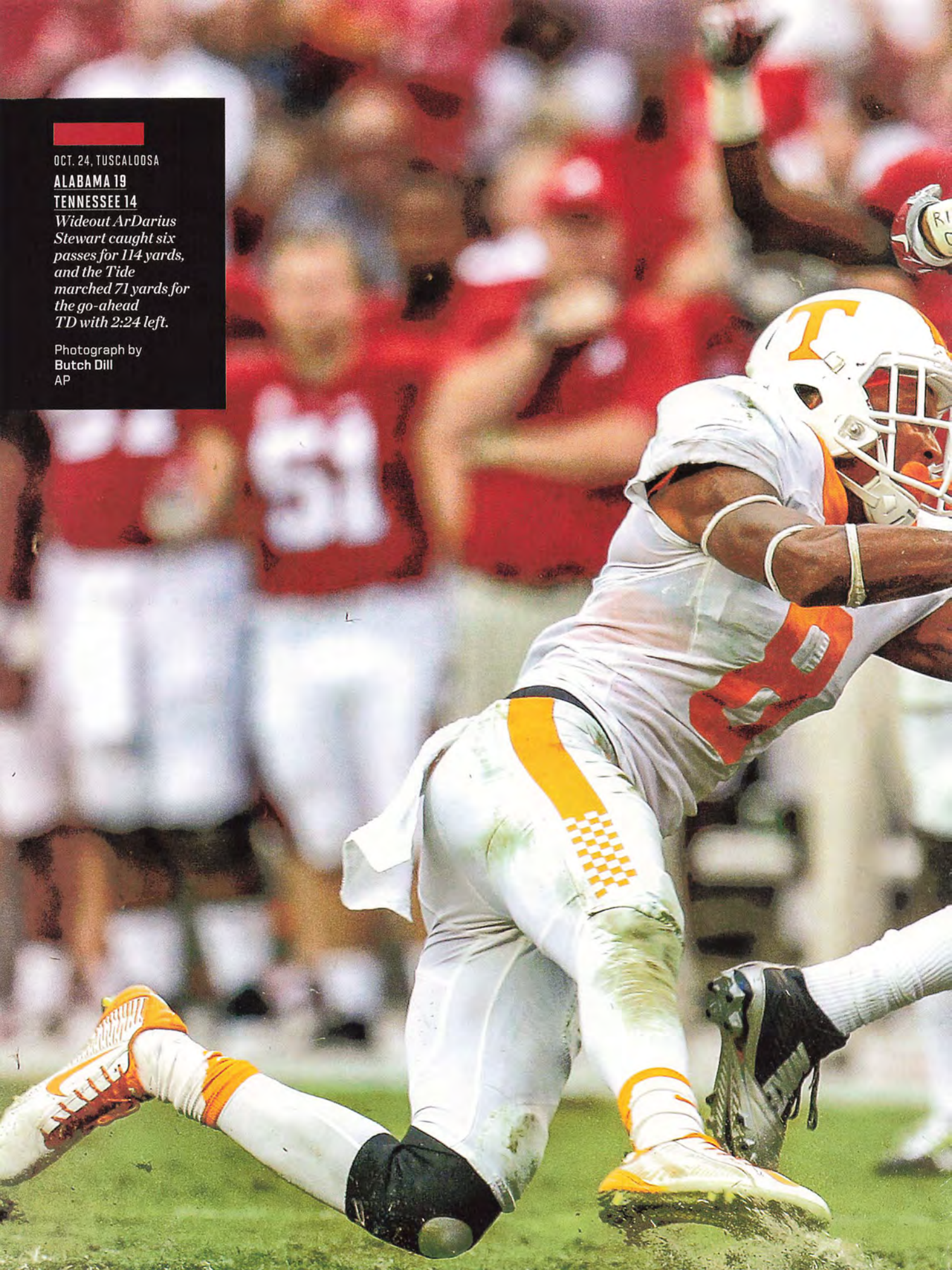
OCT. 17, COLLEGE STATION

ALABAMA 41

TEXAS A&M 23

Jackson's 93-yard pick-six—one of four interceptions by the Tide—loomed large on the big screen. The junior had five INTs on the season.

Photograph by
Vasha Hunt
AL.com/Landov



OCT. 24, TUSCALOOSA

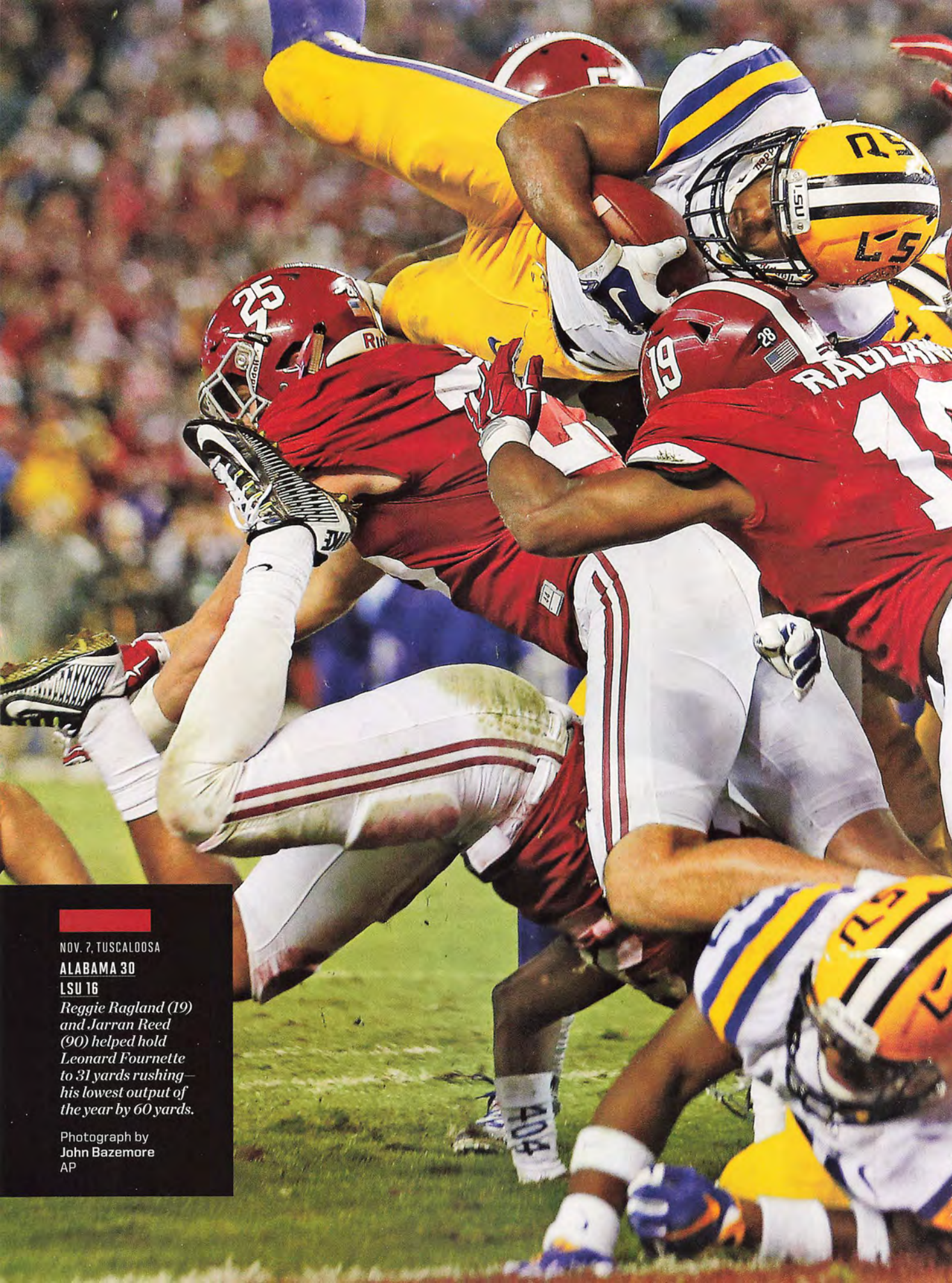
ALABAMA 19

TENNESSEE 14

Wideout ArDarius Stewart caught six passes for 114 yards, and the Tide marched 71 yards for the go-ahead TD with 2:24 left.

Photograph by
Butch Dill
AP





NOV. 7, TUSCALOOSA

ALABAMA 30

LSU 16

Reggie Ragland (19) and Jarran Reed (90) helped hold Leonard Fournette to 31 yards rushing—his lowest output of the year by 60 yards.

Photograph by
John Bazemore
AP





NOV. 14, STARKVILLE

ALABAMA 31

MISSISSIPPI STATE 6

Noseguard Jonathan Allen (93) and the Tide wrapped up star QB Dak Prescott, who threw for 300 yards but no touchdowns.

Photograph by
Vasha Hunt
AL.com/Landov



PRESCOTT


15

ORN

DESPER

62

93



NOV. 21, TUSCALOOSA

ALABAMA 56

CHARLESTON SOUTHERN 6

Wide receiver Richard Mullaney, a graduate transfer, had one of Bama's season-high eight TDs, a 21-yard, first-quarter grab.

Photograph by
Kevin C. Cox
Getty Images



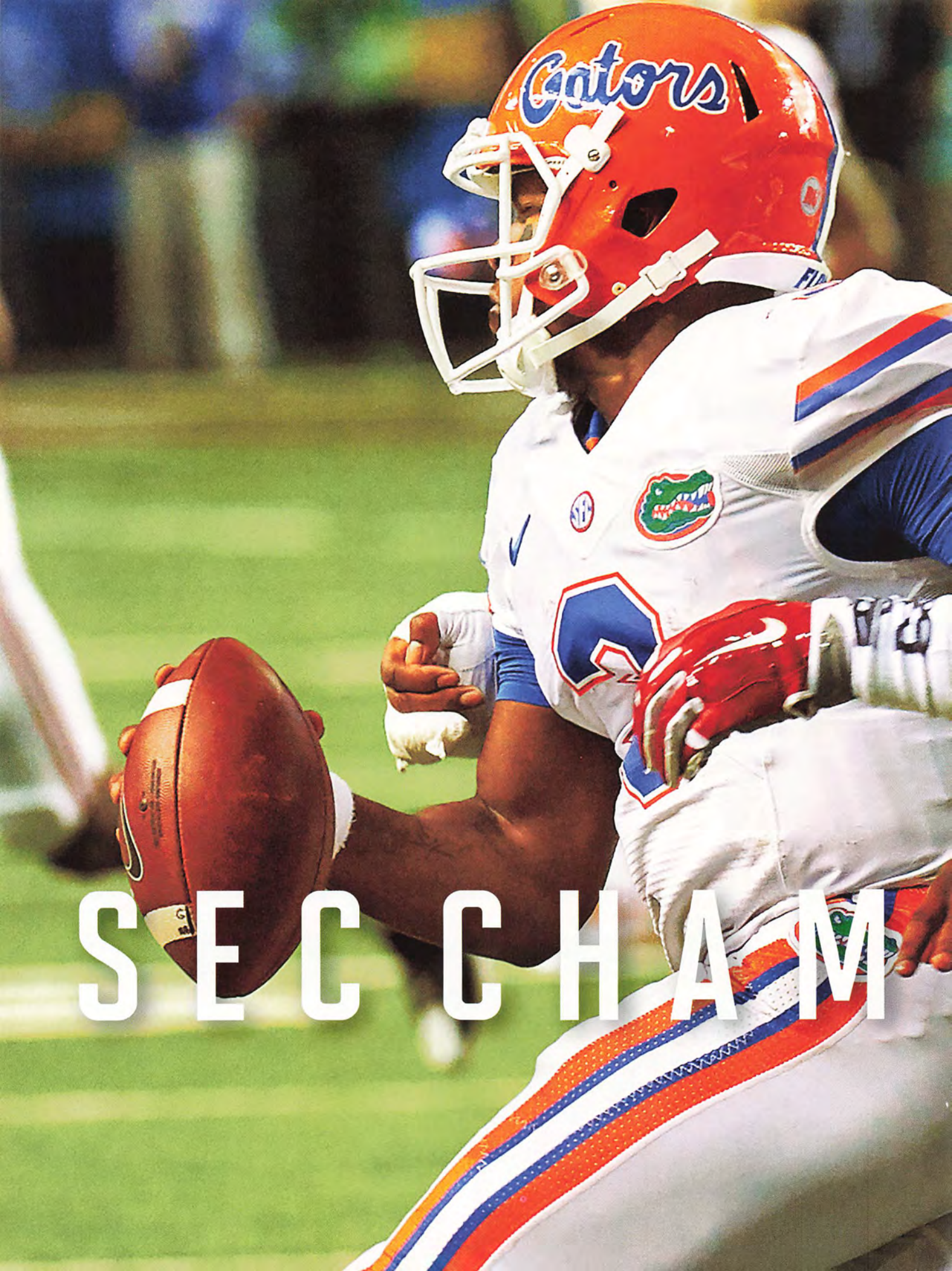
NOV. 28, AUBURN

ALABAMA 29


AUBURN 13

Cornerback Cyrus Jones helped limit the Tigers to 10 of 23 passing in a dominant display that clinched the SEC West title.

Photograph by
Julie Bennett
AL.com/Landov



SECCHAM



DEC. 5, 2015

DISMAL DAY

*Alabama linebacker
Reuben Foster
(10) chased down
Florida's Treon
Harris, who threw
for just 165 yards and
earned a quarterback
rating of 5.1.*

Photographs by
Scott Cunningham
For Sports Illustrated

P I O N S H I P

SWAMPED

The Gators could do little right: They had a punt blocked for a safety (right) and gained just three yards of offense in the second and third quarters. Henry (2) clinched his case for winning the Heisman, rushing for 189 yards and a TD.



FEEDING THE MACHINE

THE MACHINE rolled on. For the fourth time in seven seasons, Alabama players partied on the turf of the Georgia Dome as confetti fell on the first Saturday in December.

The Crimson Tide rolled on toward the College Football Playoff thanks to an excellent defense and a mostly competent offense. As expected, the Tide struggled with Florida's defense early in the SEC title game. Coach Nick Saban had said the Gators would have the best defense his team faced all year, and he wasn't wrong; Florida held Alabama to 42 yards in the first quarter. What Saban didn't say during the week—but what anyone who watched college football in November could see—was that Florida's horrible offense would not be able to move the ball on the Crimson Tide, giving Alabama's offense plenty of chances to wear down the Gators' defense.

Florida's 7-2 lead—courtesy of an 85-yard Antonio Callaway punt return in the second quarter—turned into a 22-7 deficit in the third as Alabama hogged the ball and Florida melted down during its rare chances on offense. Tailback Derrick Henry (44 carries, 189 yards one TD) and quarterback Jake Coker (18 of 26, 204 passing yards, two TDs) guided Alabama down the field at a deliberate pace. The first drive of the second half (12 plays for 65 yards) took 6:56, and their next drive (10 plays for 81 yards) lasted 4:47.

Florida just couldn't keep the ball for long. Quarterback Treon Harris completed 9 of 24 passes for 165 yards—and 68 of those came in the first quarter. The Gators seemed to have some semblance of a chance offensively for the first 15 minutes but fell apart in the second quarter. When Florida punted midway through the fourth, the Gators had been held to minus-two yards rushing since the end of the first.

The performance gave the playoff selection committee little choice but to send Alabama to the postseason with a shot at a national title for the fourth time in five years and the fifth time in seven. This century, only Pete Carroll's USC program has come close to this kind of consistency, but even Carroll's Trojans couldn't keep rolling for as long as the Crimson Tide have.

The names have changed. The results have not. Mark Ingram handed off to Trent Richardson, who tossed to T.J. Yeldon, who flipped to Derrick Henry. Rolando McClain begat Dont'a Hightower, who begat C.J. Mosley, who begat Reggie Ragland. Since 2008 the Tide have shuffled through three offensive coordinators with little to no drop-off.

But even for the people inside the machine, this year felt different. The rest of the SEC West had gradually closed the talent gap with Ala-

bama. A program can only stack so many five-star recruits before some of the best athletes in the nation choose to go elsewhere to play right away. The difference is that most programs, even the best ones, eventually dip, if only for a year. Alabama hasn't dipped, though even Saban wondered if this team could match its predecessors' championship standards after a 43-37 home loss to Ole Miss on Sept. 19.

"I don't think anybody really thought after the Ole Miss game that this team would wind up here," Saban said after the 29-15 win over Florida had improved Alabama's record to 12-1. "To be honest with you, I had some questions in my mind as to whether we'd wind up here."

But the Tide grew from that loss. As Alabama players dissected the run to the SEC title, many of them used the phrase "after the Ole Miss game." It provided a line of demarcation for their season. Saban has said he doesn't understand why it usually takes a negative situation to encourage a team to grow, but it does. And that loss helped this team grow into one of Saban's favorites. "We haven't had issues," he said. "We haven't had lots of problems. I don't have to call guys in at all. Everybody sort of bought in. Really a fun team to coach. Sometimes you have really good teams that have talent, but with that talent comes some issues. This team doesn't have a lot of issues."

Perhaps this is because these players understand what Saban wants from them. Their leaders are players such as Henry and Ragland, who could have been an early-round NFL draft pick last May but felt that he had more to learn in Tuscaloosa. "Not everybody can play for Coach Saban," Ragland said. "He puts pressure on us. Life is not going to take it easy on us, so he's not going to take it easy on us."

—Andy Staples

DECEMBER 31, 2015

GETTING SOME AIR

Just because Coker hadn't thrown many long bombs—only 13 passes this season were for 30 or more yards—didn't mean he couldn't go deep, as he proved against the Spartans.

Photographs by
Greg Nelson
For Sports Illustrated

COTTON B





OWL



NOWHERE TO RUN

The Tide defense held L.J. Scott (3) and the Spartans to just 29 yards rushing while Ridley (below) connected with Coker for eight receptions and two TDs. Cyrus Jones (5) had a 57-yard punt return for a TD in the third quarter.



AN OVER-THE-TOP VICTORY

"Well, Coker, he's a game manager. Talking defensively, what we want to do is stop the run. That's what we want to do every week, especially this week going against Derrick Henry and that Alabama offensive line. So, we feel like if we can put the game in Coker's hand to throw it, that's what we really want to do."

—Michigan State junior linebacker Riley Bullough on Dec. 27

THAT QUOTE represents the most polite way a defender can say he doesn't respect an opposing quarterback. And if Michigan State's goal was to make Alabama fifth-year senior QB Jake Coker beat them in the Cotton Bowl, then the Spartans succeeded. They held Heisman Trophy-winning tailback Derrick Henry to 75 rushing yards, his third-lowest output of the season, and placed the burden of moving the offense almost entirely on Coker.

The 6' 5", 232-pound quarterback responded to Michigan State's dare by combining with the suffocating Bama defense to crush the Spartans 38-0. He completed 25 of 30 attempts for 286 yards with two touchdowns. Coker, as is his custom, took no credit for his dissection of one of the nation's best defenses. Instead he praised 6' 1" freshman receiver Calvin Ridley, who caught eight passes for 138 yards with two scores. "We've just got a lot of athletes on the outside, and Calvin did a great job of getting open and making plays," Coker said after the game.

The win in the College Football Playoff semifinal meant that Coker could chase a second national championship ring against Clemson on Jan. 11. Unlike some of his teammates, Coker didn't win his first in 2012. He won it in '13 as the redshirt sophomore backup to Jameis Winston at Florida State. Seminoles coach Jimbo Fisher has said that the decision to start Winston over Coker was difficult, but Winston's roll to a Heisman Trophy that season makes that seem hard to believe. After Coker's performance against the Spartans on New Year's Eve, it's easier to see why Fisher stretched the preseason competition between Coker and Winston well into August 2013.

Coker earned a bachelor's degree in marketing from Florida State in '14 and decamped to Tuscaloosa, where Blake Sims beat him out for the starting job that fall. But after being named the starter in camp this season and locking up the job for good in relief of sophomore Cooper Bateman during a 43-37 loss to Ole Miss on Sept. 19, Coker has earned the respect of his teammates and the trust of his coordinator.

Michigan State players can be forgiven for believing that shutting down Henry would cause Alabama's offense to grind to a halt. It was only

natural to assume that the Tide's reliance on Henry was due to a weakness in the passing game. But inside the Alabama locker room, confidence in Coker's arm never wavered. He entered the Dec. 31 game with only 13 completions of 30 or more yards, but Tide players had seen Coker frequently air it out in practice.

With 6:05 remaining in the first half, Ridley lined up on the right hash. The cornerback picked up Alabama 6' 3" senior receiver Richard Mullaney, who had lined up wide. This left Spartans junior safety Demetrious Cox on Ridley. A safety should never be left by himself with Ridley, but Cox was stuck. Coker faked a handoff, dropped back and launched a 50-yard rocket that hit Ridley in stride. Cox hauled down Ridley at the one-yard line, and Henry ran for a touchdown on the next play to break the scoreless stalemate.

In the third quarter, with Alabama leading 24-0, Ridley lined up in the slot again. Once more, Cox found himself alone with the most athletic receiver in the stadium. Coker faked a handoff, threw a rope, and this time Ridley hauled it in for a 50-yard touchdown.

After the game, Cox admitted to being shocked that Coker was more than the game manager he had been painted as leading up to the Cotton Bowl. "We knew he was gonna manage the game for them, but his deep ball was a lot more accurate than we had previously assumed. Props to him, he's a really good player."

In the most important contest of his life, Coker took control and broke the game open. "For him being a senior, and just how far he's come, his journey, it's awesome for him to play like that on a big stage," Alabama left guard Ross Pierschbacher said. "We knew he had it in him the whole time." —Andy Staples

CHAMPIONS



JAN. 11, 2016

STRETCH MARK

He lost 11 games to injury over the last two years, but Drake delivered a game-breaking 95-yard kick return in the fourth quarter to bolster Bama.

Photograph by
John W. McDonough
For Sports Illustrated

HIP GAME



THIS ONE IS SPECIAL

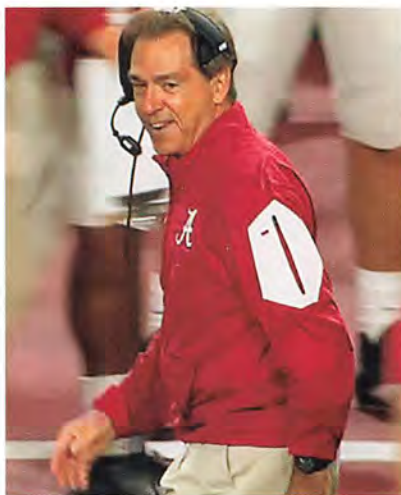
BY ANDY STAPLES

NICK SABAN'S game face typically ranges from stone to snarl, but the corners of his mouth turned north even as his team remained deadlocked with Clemson in the fourth quarter of Monday's national championship game. Was it relief? Joy? Or a knowing smirk?

At the team's hotel earlier in the day Saban had told Crimson Tide junior kicker Adam Griffith to be prepared to execute the pop kick onside protocol against the Tigers. Saban had noticed on film that when Clemson expected the ball to be booted deep into the corner, the Tigers squeezed to one side of the field. When Clemson lined up that way several times on Monday, Saban knew the pop kick could work—as long as freshman defensive back Marlon Humphrey, the play's target, didn't drop the ball the way he had in the Tide's walk-through practice. Tied at 24, with his defense panting from chasing Clemson sophomore quarterback Deshaun Watson—

who was dazzling with 405 yards passing and 73 on the ground—Saban decided Alabama needed to gamble. “He pushed all the chips in,” strength and conditioning coach Scott Cochran growled later.

Griffith tapped the ball skyward in a perfect arc. Humphrey, with nary a Clemson player within arm's distance, caught it on the 50, unleashing a (brief) grin from Saban. “He told us we're not allowed to smile during games,” special teams coordinator Bobby Williams cracked. Two plays later senior quarterback Jake Coker hit junior tight end O.J. Howard down the left sideline for a 51-yard touchdown. The Tide had wrested the momentum away from a worthy opponent, and Alabama gutted out a 45–40 win to claim its fourth national title in seven seasons. Saban, who also won the 2003 title at LSU, moved one behind Bear Bryant, who won six championships. Saban brushed off



CATCH A SMILE

A successful onside kick caused Saban to grin, while Howard's second 50-yard-plus touchdown catch made all of Tide nation happy.



ESPN (SABAN SCREENGRAB); JOHN W. McDONOUGH FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (HOWARD)





SABAN'S KICKOFF GAMBLE FORCED A CHANGE IN THE TIDE. "HE PUSHED ALL THE CHIPS IN," COCHRAN SAID.

questions about one day surpassing the Tide icon, but he couldn't hide his pride in a team that was written off in September but rose to win a title anyway, using a mix of new and old schemes and an attitude that has produced champions for as long as games have had scoreboards.

SABAN'S OFFICE can be an intimidating place even for a fellow head coach. There's the battleship-sized desk. The door that closes by remote control. The sitting area with the display of national championship rings glimmering on the coffee table. Tom Herman, Houston's first-year coach, sat in that office last April and wondered why he was the one answering the questions instead of asking them.

"Who the hell am I? Why are you asking me?" Herman, 40, remembers thinking. "You've got four national titles and how many wins?" Saban wanted to pick Herman's brain because Herman had served as the offensive coordinator on the Ohio State team that had jettisoned Alabama from the College Football Playoff three months earlier on its way to the national title. Herman had persuaded OSU coach Urban Meyer to juice the tempo of his offense, and the Buckeyes had created a fast-paced

spread system anchored by a power run game while playing ferocious, physical defense. Saban wanted to understand how. How do you pace practice? When do you pit the first-team offense against the first-team defense? Do you still run some under-center plays to give your defense experience with them? "Here's this guy at what would seemingly be the top of the mountain," Herman says, "and he's always looking for ways to get better."

The Saban who stands behind a lectern at press conferences seems to know all the answers. Behind the scenes, he is one of the sport's most inquisitive minds. Even though only three years elapsed between his most recent national titles, Saban felt compelled to seek out schematic changes that pushed the Tide back atop that mountain Herman mentioned. Meanwhile, Saban has sought new ways to instill a time-tested mind-set in the Twitter generation. Alabama has the usual nine assistant coaches, as well as five strength coaches, but the program also employs three consultants who concentrate on the players' mental fitness. Most programs use one, if that.

Though Saban brands it better than most, the belief system he calls the Process isn't that revolutionary. Players must ignore big-picture goals and focus on dominating the task at hand, be it a play, a bench-press rep or a math test. Coaches, CEOs and moms have preached this line of thinking for decades. What makes Saban's staff special is its ability to get a large group of 18- to 22-year-olds to embrace this philosophy year after

AIR FORCE

After being sacked four times in the first half, Coker rebounded to throw two touchdown passes in the final two quarters. He would finish the game with 335 yards and no interceptions.

AL THELMANS FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

year. "When I first started this, I probably had the same approach with everybody and thought everybody should buy into that approach," Saban says. "Now it's more the individual and what makes it happen for him, because success is always tied to action, but action is always tied to your thoughts."

That's why Cochran, Saban's player development consigliere for 12 seasons, routinely consults with the trio of mental experts. There's Lionel Rosen, the Michigan State psychiatry professor who introduced Saban to the Process in the late 1990s, when Saban coached the Spartans. The white-bearded Rosen's colleagues refer to him as Gandalf. Then there's Trevor Moawad, who specializes in mental training and leadership, and Kevin Elko, who specializes in motivation. The "recent calls" list on Cochran's cellphone is filled with the numbers of those three. "There may be a few to my wife," Cochran jokes.

Saban spent this off-season preaching to his team about the "illusion of choice." While it seemed the players had a wide range of options for their personal and football lives, Saban and his staff stressed to them that only a narrow set of choices would lead to the success they craved. The 2014 team didn't make those choices, and it got bounced by the Buckeyes in the Sugar Bowl. Senior linebacker Reggie Ragland couldn't forget how the silence in the Superdome locker room after that loss was broken only by the crying of outgoing senior Blake Sims, who wouldn't get another chance to chase a national title as Alabama's quarterback. "I see it all the time," Ragland says. "I could be lying in bed, and it just pops up in my head. I can't believe it happened."

A core group of respected players that included Ragland, junior tailback Derrick Henry, senior center Ryan Kelly, sophomore offensive tackle Cam Robinson and defensive ends A'Shawn Robinson and Jarran Reed resolved to never feel that way again. If they saw a teammate slacking, they would prod and shame that player. How did the veterans know the youngsters would fall in



line? "Do you see A'Shawn?" Ragland asked as he pointed at the bald, bearded 312-pounder who has been mistaken for a coach since high school.

WITH THE team's attitude properly adjusted and self-policed, coaches could concentrate on strategic adjustments that made the Tide look quite different at times from the squad that won three national titles from 2009 through '12. A change in the play-clock rules before the '08 season moved the sport into a period of rapid evolution, and it forced Saban to alter schemes that had won the rings on his coffee table. The Crimson Tide's '12 title team huddled before most plays. It didn't use Jet motion, which requires a receiver to come sprinting horizontally across the formation and arrive at the quarterback just after the snap. The Alabama defense featured safeties who weighed more than 200 pounds.

In 2015 the Tide often ditched the

TRICK KICK

Griffith (above) booted the ball in a perfect arc, giving Humphrey (26) time to get under it and enable Alabama to seize the momentum for good.

huddle and cranked the tempo. Some plays looked borrowed from the Ohio State or Oregon playbooks. When Alabama played nickel to counter spread offenses, all five defensive backs were current or former cornerbacks who weighed less than 200 pounds and had enough speed to cover a receiver streaking across the field.

The addition of Jet motion and other concepts from spread schemes allowed Alabama to force defenses to guard the perimeter even when the Tide planned to run between the tackles. The lighter, faster secondary, combined with a deep, dominant front seven, helped Alabama apply more pressure on quarterbacks, cut down on coverage busts and slash its passing yards allowed by nearly 40 per game.



Still, the evolution involved some trial and error. Saban and offensive coordinator Lane Kiffin decided before the Tide played Ole Miss on Sept. 19 that sophomore Cooper Bateman should start at quarterback instead of Coker, who had started Alabama's first two games. Coker kept his mouth shut, but inside he seethed. "The reasoning was athleticism," says Coker, who transferred from Florida State to Alabama in 2014 with a reputation as a relatively stationary pocket passer. "That's what was laid out for me."

Kiffin sensed Coker's anger, and it delighted the coordinator. "We don't expect you to agree with this decision," Kiffin remembers telling Coker. "If you agree with it, you're not competitive. We expect you to go prove it wrong."

"WE DON'T EXPECT YOU TO AGREE," KIFFIN TOLD COKER. "WE EXPECT YOU TO GO PROVE IT WRONG."

Coker got his chance in the second quarter. Bateman went to the sideline after throwing a ball up for grabs and then getting clobbered by an Ole Miss player during safety Trae Elston's interception return. When Coker entered, Alabama trailed by two touchdowns thanks in part to that interception and two fumbled kickoffs. On Coker's first possession he scrambled 15 yards on a third-and-10 to keep the drive alive and set up a touchdown pass to senior receiver Richard Mullaney. Coker couldn't win the game—the Rebels held on for a 43–37 victory—but he did win the respect of the team. Players loved his willingness to put his shoulder down to gain extra yards. And as opponents who flushed Coker from the pocket on third downs learned the hard way, the 6' 5" 232-pounder from Mobile could deliver punishment. When Coker flattened Texas A&M sophomore cornerback Nick Harvey with a forearm shiver along the sideline during Alabama's 41–23 win in College Station, it inspired Coker's teammates to create nicknames for him that included Baby Roethlisberger and Vanilla Vick.

WHILE TIDE coaches solved their quarterback dilemma against Ole Miss, they still had to deal with the fallout from the loss. They had committed five turnovers and run 101 plays. Neither of those stats was representative of a Saban team, but the first was a result of disastrous errors and the second a result of an intentional shift to a faster-paced offense. On Sa-

ban's *Hey Coach* radio show the following Thursday night, a caller named Joe from Hartselle, Ala., scolded Saban for getting away from "old-fashioned smashmouth Alabama football." Saban put his chin in his hand and agreed. "Hey, Joe, I'm all right with that," Saban said. "I like that kind of ball."

Then Saban straightened up and offered a lecture on how the Tide and their opponents had changed in recent years. No longer could Alabama's offense simply enforce its will. The rest of the SEC West had recruited too well—especially on the defensive line—and the Tide couldn't always thrive by running between the tackles to set up the play-action pass. Saban explained that Alabama had needed to adopt some of the same up-tempo, spread-the-field principles embraced by Ole Miss, Texas A&M and most of the schools in the Big 12. There would be times when Alabama could chew up yards inside the hashmarks, but there would be others when the Tide would need to snap the ball quickly and attack the perimeter. "Those things are very effective, and they're very difficult to defend," Saban told Joe. "If you don't do some of that, you're not taking advantage of the rules."

Alabama's offense succeeded from that point forward because the Tide figured out how to play the old-fashioned way when necessary and how to play the hurried-up, wide-open style when that offered more scoring opportunities. Cutting down on turnovers—Alabama committed only 10 in 12 games after the Ole Miss loss—forced



opponents to traverse the length of the field against the Tide's smothering defense. This allowed Alabama to adopt a more conservative offense that worked because it has a jumbo tailback who plays as if he's made of iron. Toward the end of the regular season the Tide leaned heavily on the 6' 3", 242-pound Henry to consume yards and clock. Alabama has tried under Saban to platoon its backs to keep them fresh and healthy, but a series of injuries to senior Kenyan Drake forced Henry to carry most of the load. This suited Henry fine; while most backs wear down, Henry seemed to get stronger with each carry.

Tide coaches truly understood what kind of weapon they had in a 30-16 win against LSU. As Bama's defense

held presumptive Heisman Trophy favorite Leonard Fournette to 31 yards on 19 carries, Henry carried 38 times for 210 yards and three touchdowns. The Tide bled the final 9:18 from the clock by handing to Henry on 10 of 13 plays. Henry traded places with Fournette that night, and Henry sealed his Heisman win by gaining 460 yards on 90 total carries in wins against Auburn in the Iron Bowl and Florida in the SEC championship game. "I think it's a mind-set," Alabama senior fullback Michael Nysewander says of Henry's ability to boost his power as his workload increases. "When his body starts to wear down, his mind tells it no."

But even the Heisman recipient

couldn't carry the offense against certain defenses. In the Cotton Bowl, Michigan State crammed the box to stuff Henry. Kiffin had Coker poke around the outside of the defense with bubble screens until the Tide got the matchup they craved: Freshman receiver Calvin Ridley lined up in the slot against a safety, who stood no chance. Twice Coker exploited this mismatch for 50-yard gains, and he wound up completing 25 of 30 passes for 286 yards and two touchdowns in a 38-0 win.

While the offense needed time to find its way, Alabama's defense never wavered. The preseason shift of 194-pound junior Eddie Jackson to safety to team with 196-pound senior Geno Matias-Smith



ROBINSON AND REED, WHO HAD EVOLVED INTO LEADERS, SET A TONE THAT FILTERED THROUGH THE D.



PROVING GROUND

Henry's three TDs, including this second-quarter score (far left), helped put the Tide over the top. Afterward Coker, the title in hand, was all smiles.

August that the Tide would get the 6' 6", 242-pound Howard more involved this year; he just didn't specify when. Howard entered Monday with only 394 receiving yards this season. Against Clemson, he caught five passes for 208 yards and two touchdowns.

That so many clutch performers rose when needed only reinforced why this team made Saban prouder than any group he's coached. While preparing for Clemson, Saban noticed the toll 14 games had taken. Practices weren't crisp. Players were aching and fatigued. Again, he reminded them that they had a choice. "Are you going to choose to do things you need to do to accomplish the goal that you have?" Saban asked his team. On Monday he got his answer. "They did it," he says.

Now that Saban has proven he can win a title with a higher tempo offense, well-timed trickery and even the occasional smile, does this mean he's gone soft? Will Joe from Hartselle ever get his old-fashioned, smashmouth Alabama football back? Terry Saban, who has watched her husband coach longer than anyone, isn't worried. "Everything is relative," she says. "Even if he's softened compared to where he started, he's still pretty ferocious." □

made the Tide less susceptible to long passing plays, and the rotation of fresh defensive linemen allowed Alabama to torture opposing quarterbacks. A'Shawn Robinson and Reed, who had evolved into leaders, set a tone that filtered through the entire defense. This attitude wasn't limited to games. "Just ask Blake Barnett, our scout quarterback. We have to peel them off him each day," says defensive coordinator Kirby Smart, who remained to coach the wins against Michigan State and Clemson even though he'd already been named coach at Georgia. "You can't say statistically they're the best, because maybe they're not as good as 2011," Smart says of this year's D. "But they are the most fun to coach."

WITH WATSON channeling former Texas quarterback Vince Young and Clemson's defensive end combo of Shaq Lawson and Kevin Dodd battering Coker, Alabama needed another spark from the third phase of the game on Monday—especially after the Tigers recovered from the on-side kick-Howard touchdown combo and quickly drove for a field goal that cut the Tide's lead to 31-27. Enter Drake, who took the ensuing kickoff 95 yards for a touchdown. After Watson led the Tigers to another TD, Coker, who finished 16 of 25 for 335 yards and two touchdowns, hit Howard for a 63-yard gain to the Clemson 14-yard line. Kiffin had promised in



FOR THE RECORD

The Crimson Tide players racked up numbers that were among the nation's best at nearly every position. It's no wonder they rolled to the 2015 championship

BY SHANNON LANE

2015 | ALABAMA STATISTICS

PASSING

PLAYER	COMP	ATT	PCT	YDS	TD	INT	LONG	RATING
Jake COKER	263	393	66.9	3,110	21	8	81	147.0
Cooper BATEMAN	37	52	71.2	291	1	2	31	116.8

RUSHING

PLAYER	ATT	YDS	YDS/ATT	LONG	TD
Derrick HENRY	395	2,219	5.6	74	28
Kenyan DRAKE	77	408	5.3	58	1
Damien HARRIS	46	157	3.4	41	1
Bo SCARBROUGH	18	104	5.8	24	1
Jake COKER	74	68	0.9	26	2
Ronnie CLARK	5	20	4.0	11	0
Derrick GORE	6	15	2.5	8	0
ArDarius STEWART	5	14	2.8	8	0
Cooper BATEMAN	5	8	1.6	6	0

RECEIVING

PLAYER	REC	YDS	YDS/REC	LONG	TD
Calvin RIDLEY	89	1,045	11.7	81	7
ArDarius STEWART	63	700	11.1	38	4
O.J. HOWARD	38	602	15.8	63	2
Richard MULLANEY	38	390	10.3	29	5
Kenyan DRAKE	29	276	9.5	69	1
Derrick HENRY	11	91	8.3	28	0
Robert FOSTER	10	116	11.6	22	2
Cam SIMS	6	46	7.7	16	0
Damien HARRIS	4	13	3.2	8	0
TY FLOURNOY-SMITH	3	48	16.0	31	0
Chris BLACK	2	23	11.5	19	0
Xavian MARKS	2	19	9.5	13	0
Daylon CHARLOT	2	9	4.5	8	0
Michael NYSEWANDER	1	19	19.0	19	1

KICKING

PLAYER	FGM	FGA	LONG	XPM	XP
Adam GRIFFITH	23	32	55	62	62

PUNTING

PLAYER	PUNTS	AVG.	LONG	IN-20	TB
JK SCOTT	70	3,094	59	25	9

DEFENSE

PLAYER	SOLO	AST	TT	SACK	INT
Reggie RAGLAND	60	42	102	2½	0
Reuben FOSTER	48	25	73	2	0
Geno MATIAS-SMITH	51	21	72	0	1
Jarran REED	17	40	57	1	0
Eddie JACKSON	34	12	46	0	6
A'Shawn ROBINSON	18	28	46	3½	0
Marlon HUMPHREY	35	10	45	0	3
Minkah FITZPATRICK	30	15	45	2	2
Ryan ANDERSON	21	16	37	6	0
Cyrus JONES	29	8	37	0	2
Jonathan ALLEN	19	17	36	12	0
Dalvin TOMLINSON	12	22	34	0	0
Dillon LEE	16	11	27	1	2
Shaun Dion HAMILTON	14	13	27	0	0
Denzel DEVAL	11	14	25	1	0
Tim WILLIAMS	13	6	19	10½	0
D.J. PETTWAY	11	7	18	2	0
Ronnie HARRISON	11	6	17	1	2
Tony BROWN	12	4	16	0	0
Da'Shawn HAND	7	9	16	3	0
Bradley SYLVE	9	7	16	0	0
Maurice SMITH	7	8	15	1	0
Daron PAYNE	6	7	13	½	0
Rashaan EVANS	7	3	10	4	0
Keith HOLCOMBE	6	3	9	0	0
Michael NYSEWANDER	3	3	6	0	0
Jabriel WASHINGTON	4	2	6	0	1
Joshua FRAZIER	1	3	4	0	0
Shawn BURGESS-BECKER	3	0	3	0	0
Darren LAKE	1	2	3	0	0
Cole MAZZA	1	2	3	0	0
Laurence HOOTIE JONES	0	2	2	0	0
O.J. HOWARD	2	0	2	0	0
Anthony AVERETT	1	1	2	0	0
Damien HARRIS	2	0	2	0	0
Dakota BALL	0	1	1	0	0
Walker JONES	1	0	1	0	0
Derrick GORE	1	0	1	0	0
O.J. SMITH	0	1	1	0	0
Dominick JACKSON	1	0	1	0	0



BY THE NUMBERS

29 PLAYERS have already earned a degree going into the title game, the most of any bowl team. Three of those players, quarterback Jake Coker, offensive lineman Isaac Luatua and center Ryan Kelly, have earned master's degrees.

2 HEISMAN TROPHY WINNERS in Alabama's history. This year junior Derrick Henry became the second player to win the award; Mark Ingram won it as a sophomore in 2009, after rushing for 1,658 yards and scoring 17 TDs.

46 NON-OFFENSIVE TOUCHDOWNS scored in the Nick Saban era. The Tide had 10 this season, three more than any other SEC team. Alabama's defense allowed the second-fewest rushing yards in the country (1,136), while making 902 total tackles and 19 interceptions.

20 STRAIGHT GAMES in which Henry has scored a touchdown, the longest streak in SEC history, breaking the

mark set by Tim Tebow (14) from 2006 to '07. The last time Henry did not visit the end zone was Nov. 8, 2014, against LSU.

1,045 RECEIVING YARDS for Calvin Ridley, the most by a freshman in school history, breaking Amari Cooper's record of 1,000 set in 2012. Ridley also caught Coker's longest pass of the season, an 81-yard touchdown toss against Arkansas in Week 6.

13-3 RECORD AGAINST Clemson, dating back to 1900, when the Tigers won 35-0. The Crimson Tide has won the last 13 meetings, including seven shutouts.

2,219 RUSHING YARDS by Henry this season, which broke Herschel Walker's SEC record of 1,891. Henry is the 25th NCAA player to rush for more than 2,000 yards in a single season. Henry's 3,591 career rushing yards broke the Tide record previously set by Shaun Alexander (3,565).

9 RANKED OPPONENTS for Alabama this season, the most of any FBS team. The Tide was 8-1 in those

games, losing only to No. 15-ranked Ole Miss in Week 3. Eleven of Alabama's regular-season opponents went on to play in bowl games.

36 BOWL WINS for Alabama in 64 total appearances, both the most of any program. USC has the next most, with 33 victories in 51 appearances.

230 YARDS in interception returns by defensive back Eddie Jackson (which ranked second in the country and first in the SEC). The junior had a team-leading six interceptions this season, including two for 119 yards against Texas A&M on Oct. 17.

2 RIMINGTON TROPHY WINNERS in Alabama history, including this year. Kelly missed just eight assignments over 948 snaps during the regular season while not allowing a sack. The senior was also named SEC scholar-athlete of the year.

37 NFL DRAFT PICKS from Alabama over the last five years, the most from any school. The draftees include four Super Bowl champions and seven Pro Bowl selections.



THE HI

Since Alabama played its first football game in is nearly unmatched. A salute to the players and

STORMING THROUGH

George Washington defenders had trouble catching Johnny (Hurri) Cain—a problem most Bama opponents suffered in 1932. Cain scored nine touchdowns in the first four games that season.

Photographs by
Bettmann
Corbis



STORY

1892, the Tide have achieved a level of success that teams most responsible for that winning legacy

TEN FOR THE AGES

By beating Clemson in the College Football Playoff, Alabama claimed its 11th consensus national championship. Here's how the other titles were won

COACH

1961

BEAR BRYANT
RECORD 11-0
(7-0 CONFERENCE)

1964

BEAR BRYANT
RECORD 10-1
(8-0 CONFERENCE)

1965

BEAR BRYANT
RECORD 9-1-1
(6-1-1 CONFERENCE)



1973

BEAR BRYANT
RECORD 11-1
(8-0 CONFERENCE)

1978

BEAR BRYANT
RECORD 11-1
(6-0 CONFERENCE)

1979

BEAR BRYANT
RECORD 12-0
(6-0 CONFERENCE)

1992

GENE STALLINGS
RECORD 13-0
(8-0 CONFERENCE)



2009

NICK SABAN
RECORD 14-0
(8-0 CONFERENCE)

2011

NICK SABAN
RECORD 12-1
(7-1 CONFERENCE)



2012

NICK SABAN
RECORD 13-1
(7-1 CONFERENCE)

ALL-AMERICAS

BILLY NEIGHBORS, DT

WAYNE FREEMAN, G
DAN KEARLEY, DT
JOE NAMATH, QB; DAVID RAY, PK

PAUL CRANE, C
STEVE SLOAN, QB

BUDDY BROWN, LT
WOODROW LOWE, LB
WAYNE WHEELER, SE

BARRY KRAUSS, LB
MARTY LYONS, DT

JIM BUNCH, OT
DON MCNEAL, CB
DWIGHT STEPHENSON, C

JOHN COPELAND, DE
ERIC CURRY, DE
ANTONIO LANGHAN, CB

JAVIER ARENAS, KR; TERRENCE CODY, NG
MARK INGRAM, RB; MIKE JOHNSON, G
ROLANDO MCCLAIN, LB; LEIGH TIFFIN, K

MARK BARRON, S; DONT'A HIGHTOWER, LB
BARRETT JONES, LT
TRENT RICHARDSON, RB

BARRETT JONES, C; DEE MILINER, CB
C.J. MOSELY, LB
CHANCE WARMACK, G

TELLING NUMBER

8

Carries by sophomore Dink Wall on a 67-yard drive against Auburn.

11

Players drafted by the NFL, including Joe Namath, who was the AFL's No. 1 pick.

28

Points scored by Nebraska in the Orange Bowl, but Bama scored 39.

61

Touchdowns scored by the offense, which amassed 5,288 yards—both records.

2

Times the Tide D stopped Penn State on the one-foot line in the Sugar Bowl.

6

Third-down plays for Arkansas in the Sugar Bowl first half, for 0 total yards.

135

Yards gained by Sugar Bowl MVP Derrick Lassic (and two TDs, too).

0

Wins for Alabama over Texas in the teams' eight previous meetings.

7

Field goal attempts by the Tide's Jeremy Shelley, a bowl record. He made five.

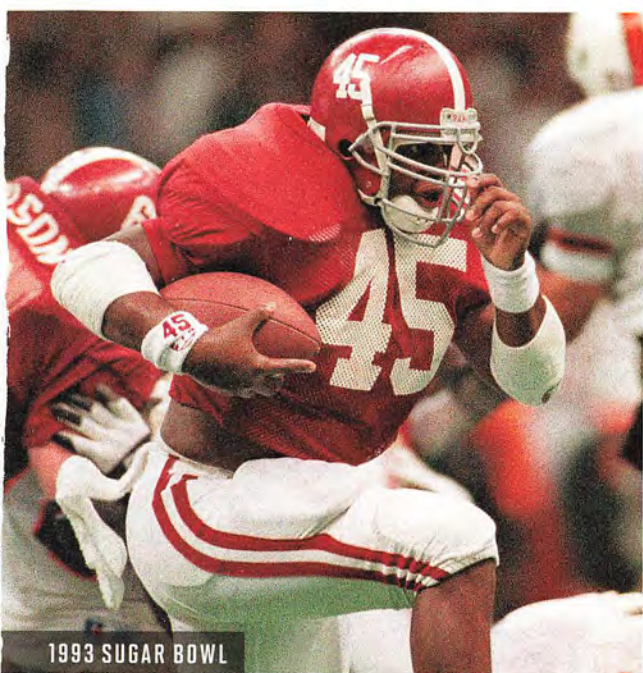
77

Career touchdown passes by AJ McCarron, most in Alabama history.

WALTER ROOSE JR. FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (BRYANT); AL TELEMANS FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (STALLINGS); DAMIAN STROHMAYER FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (SABAN); WENZ KLUTMEIER FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (1960); JOHN BEYER FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (1993); ROBERT BECK FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (2010)



1980 SUGAR BOWL



1993 SUGAR BOWL



2010 ROSE BOWL

HOW THEY WON

After trouncing Auburn 34–0 in the Iron Bowl, the Tide faced Arkansas in the Sugar Bowl. A TD run by Pat Trammell in the first quarter and a 32-yard field goal in the second sealed a 10–3 win.

Namath, who had been sidelined with an injured knee, came on shortly before halftime in the Iron Bowl. The QB engineered one TD, and Raymond Ogden returned a kick for another in a 21–14 win.

In the Orange Bowl on Jan. 1, 1966, the Tide outrushed powerful Nebraska 222 yards to 145, and Bryant called for three inside kicks, two of which Alabama recovered in the 39–28 victory.

Against Auburn the Tide had 405 yards of offense and shut out the Tigers 35–0 to earn the national title. A gut-wrenching 24–23 loss to Notre Dame in the Sugar Bowl would be the only loss.

A stunting, blitzing Alabama defense held Penn State quarterback Chuck Fusina and the Nittany Lions to just 19 rushing yards for the game in the 14–7 Sugar Bowl win.

Bama running back Steve Whitman (45, top) ran for 37 yards and a touchdown in the 24–9 Sugar Bowl victory over Arkansas before a record 77,486 fans in the Superdome.

In an epic 34–13 upset of defending champion Miami, the Tide picked off Hurricanes QB Gino Torretta three times, and Tarrant Lynch (45) and the Tide rushed for 267 yards.

Tide defensive tackle Marcell Dareus knocked Texas QB Colt McCoy out of the game in the first quarter with an injured right shoulder, and Ingram ran for 116 yards and two TDs in a 37–21 Rose Bowl win.

The BCS title game was an all-SEC affair as the Tide shut out LSU 21–0 in the Superdome. The Bama D allowed the Tigers to cross the 50-yard line just once.

Alabama running backs Eddie Lacy (140 yards) and T.J. Yeldon (108 yards) were the stars of the 42–14 win over Notre Dame as the Tide won their third BCS championship in four years.

WORKHORSE

Known as the Italian Stallion, Musso (22) rushed for 2,741 yards, which ranks eighth in team history, and 34 rushing touchdowns in his three seasons in Tuscaloosa.



ALL-TIME TEAM

The ultimate roll (Tide) call of the best of the best Alabama players

OFFENSE

- QB** / KEN STABLER / 1965 TO '67
- RB** / SHAUN ALEXANDER / 1996 TO '99
- RB** / JOHNNY MUSSO / 1969 TO '71
- RB** / DERRICK HENRY / 2013 TO PRESENT
- SE** / DON HUTSON / 1932 TO '34
- T** / CHRIS SAMUELS / 1996 TO '99
- G** / JOHN HANNAH / 1970 TO '72
- C** / SYLVESTER CROOM / 1972 TO '74
- G** / WAYNE FREEMAN / 1962 TO '64
- T** / JIM BUNCH / 1976 TO '79
- SE** / OZZIE NEWSOME / 1974 TO '77

DEFENSE

- DE** / ERIC CURRY / 1990 TO '92
- DT** / MARTY LYONS / 1976 TO '78
- DT** / JON HAND / 1982 TO '85
- DE** / LEROY COOK / 1972 TO '75
- LB** / DERRICK THOMAS / 1985 TO '88
- LB** / LEE ROY JORDAN / 1960 TO '62
- LB** / CORNELIUS BENNETT / 1983 TO '86
- LB** / WOODROW LOWE / 1972 TO '75
- DB** / ANTONIO LANGHAM / 1990 TO '93
- DB** / KEVIN JACKSON / 1995 TO '96
- DB** / DON MCNEAL / 1977 TO '79

SPECIAL TEAMS

- K** / MIKE PROCTOR / 1992 TO '95
- P** / GREG GANTT / 1971 TO '73
- KR/PR** / HARRY GILMER / 1944 TO '47



NEWSOME



STABLER



JORDAN



TALE OF THE TAPE

The current coach is gaining ground on the Bear

BY DAVID SABINO



BEAR BRYANT

Sept. 11, 1913, Moro Bottom, Ark.

The 11th of 12 children, he was raised on his family's farm in rural Arkansas.

Alabama '36

Right end

44

10 years, \$175,000

232-46-9 (.824 winning percentage)

323-85-17 (.780 winning percentage)

15-12-2

6 (all at Alabama)

31 (28 at Alabama, 3 at Texas AGM)

15 (14 at Alabama, 1 at Kentucky)

Houndstooth fedora (games)

John David Crow (Texas AGM), 1957

1933-35 (player); '36-40 (assistant); '58-82 (coach)

"We had a joint basketball-football banquet, and Adolph Rupp [Kentucky's hoops coach] was presented with a big four-door Cadillac. All I got was a cigarette lighter." —Dec. 8, 1950

Players on scholarships from other sports count against the scholarship limit of the football team to counteract Bryant's habit of stashing football players on Alabama's other sports teams.

620 children have been named after the Bear, according to the Paul W. Bryant Museum.

BORN

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

ALMA MATER

PLAYING POSITION

AGE WHEN HE TOOK OVER THE CRIMSON TIDE

INITIAL CONTRACT AT ALABAMA

RECORD AT ALABAMA

OVERALL CAREER RECORD

OVERALL CAREER BOWL RECORD

NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS

WEEKS AT NO. 1 (AP POLL)

SEC TITLES

ICONIC HEAD WEAR

HEISMAN WINNERS COACHED

SEASONS AT ALABAMA

ON WHY HE LEFT A FORMER JOB

TARGETED BY NCAA

NAMESAKES

NICK SABAN

Oct. 13, 1951, Fairmont, W.Va.

His father, Nick Sr., operated a service station while his mother, Mary, ran a Dairy Queen.

Kent State '73

Defensive back

55

8 years, \$32 million

105-18 (.853 winning percentage)

191-60-1 (.765 winning percentage)

9-8

5 (4 at Alabama, 1 at LSU)

45 (all at Alabama)

6 (4 at Alabama, 2 at LSU)

Straw hat (practice)

Mark Ingram, 2009; Derrick Henry, '15

2007-present (coach)

"If I knew that my heart was someplace else in what I wanted to do, I don't think it would be fair to the [Dolphins'] organization if I stayed." —Jan. 4, 2007

Dubbed the Saban rule because of his penchant for making myriad recruiting trips, in 2014 the NCAA prohibited head coaches from traveling to high schools during the six-week spring evaluation period.

20 kids have been named after Saban, according to the Alabama Center for Health Statistics and *The Wall Street Journal*.



HEINZ KLUETMEIER FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (BRYANT); REGAN LUNN/CAL SPORT MEDIA/AP (SABAN)



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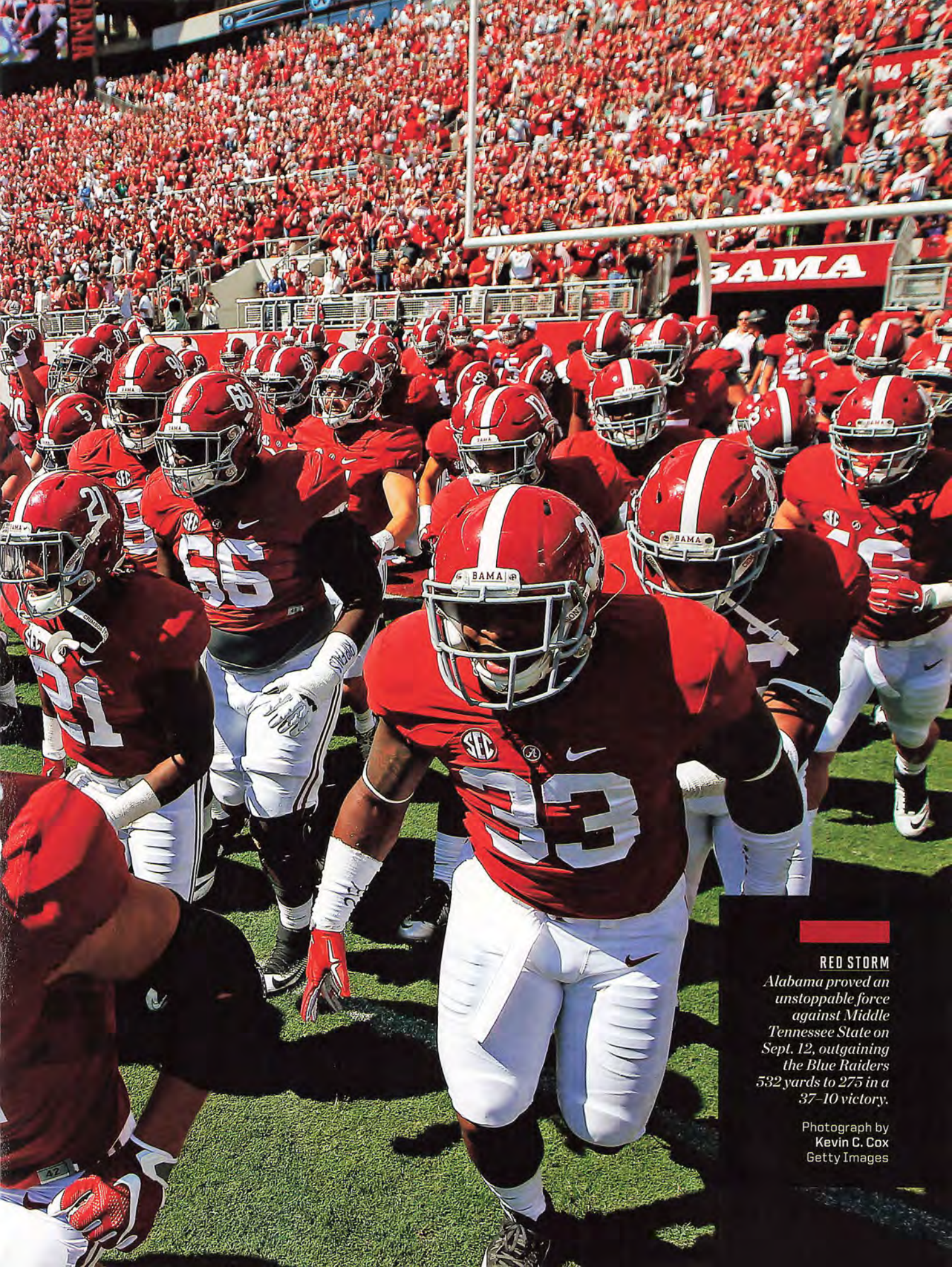
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With a Heisman-winning running back following a fearsome front seven, the Tide came rushing at opponents in waves

THE HEROES





RED STORM

Alabama proved an unstoppable force against Middle Tennessee State on Sept. 12, outgaining the Blue Raiders 532 yards to 275 in a 37-10 victory.

Photograph by
Kevin C. Cox
Getty Images





A

FROM SPORTS ILLUSTRATED DECEMBER 14, 2015

MAXIMUM IMPACT

No back gets more out of brute force than Derrick Henry, who hits the hole like a freight train as he reduces some of the most hallowed rushing records to dust

BY ANDY STAPLES

Photographs by
Scott Cunningham for Sports Illustrated

BOB DYLAN saw the look every day at practice for four seasons. The Yulee (Fla.) High coach also saw it on Friday nights in the fall. Now he sees it when he watches Alabama play. The look, Ramsay says, mixes a hint of fear with heaps of resignation and a trace of dread. No matter whether the player is bound for the NFL or the LSAT, would-be tacklers all appear the same when 6' 3", 242-pound junior Derrick Henry takes a handoff and hits the hole: Their shoulders slump, faces sag and bodies tense in anticipation of the collision to come.

"It's more like thrusting yourself into something you know is going to be unpleasant, but you do it anyway," says Ramsay, who coached Henry from 2009 to '12. "Then you're hanging on for dear life. Then you're going back to the huddle thinking, *I have to do that again?*"

Ramsay knows this look well because three years before Henry broke Herschel Walker's 34-year-old SEC single-season rushing record with 2,061 yards to become the Heisman Trophy winner, he finished his Yulee career with 12,212, crushing Ken (the Sugar Land Express) Hall's 59-year-old national high school mark. Ramsay also knows how a Henry run feels because he stood directly behind the linebackers when the Hornets did full-contact running drills. "The only thing I can equate it to," Ramsay says, "is standing on the sidewalk and a jeep goes by doing 40."

Nearly everyone tasked with tackling Henry or coaching people to tackle

STEAMROLL TIDE

Henry carried 44 times for 189 yards to lead Alabama to the SEC title, leaving the seasonlong conference mark and Florida defenders in his wake.

Henry has a vehicular analogy—but most choose a more menacing mode of transportation. “It’s literally like a freight train hitting you,” says Gunnar Cox, a Jacksonville safety who had to bring down Henry in practice as a 5’ 8”, 165-pound Yulee linebacker. Cox learned early not to hit Henry head-on. No matter. If Cox tried to take a better angle, Henry would stiff-arm him and carry him for five to 10 yards.

“I don’t know if fast-moving semi is a good visual,” says Florida coach Jim McElwain, whose defense gave up 189 yards to Henry during Alabama’s 29–15 win in the SEC championship game in Atlanta. “There was this movie one time about this train that was, like, out of control, going really fast and they had to stop it before it blew up the city.” (That would be *Unstoppable*, with Denzel Washington.)

“McElwain described it perfectly,” says Chris Murdock, a North Florida student who played alongside Henry as a 5’ 7”, 180-pound Yulee linebacker. “Imagine a train coming at you or just running into a big concrete wall.”

Henry calls to mind Eric Dickerson and Eddie George, 6’ 3” runners with speed, power and agility who showed that a higher center of gravity isn’t an impediment to racking up yards. But because of the way the game has changed—offenses have spread the field, and NFL teams have been reluctant to spend huge money on backs—it’s almost surprising that someone with Henry’s build and burst wound up carrying the ball instead of chasing quarterbacks. That, coaches and family members say, happened only because Henry refused to contemplate doing anything else.

THOSE CLOSE to Henry call him Shocka, the nickname his paternal grandmother, Gladys, coined when she learned her teenage son, also named Derrick, was going to become a father himself. Surrounded by Florida fans, Shocka grew to idolize Tim Tebow, the jumbo-sized QB who piled up yards and

RECRUITERS POINTED OUT THE LONGER AVERAGE CAREER OF PASS RUSHERS. HENRY DIDN’T CARE.

touchdowns in winning two national championships and the 2007 Heisman.

Henry’s Tebowesque tendency to run over defenders gained notice early. J.T. Medley, who coached Henry in middle school, recalls that Nassau County made a rule that required coaches to pull starters when a team went up by 18 points—a regulation that he believes was put in place to keep Henry from scoring so much. During one game when Henry was an eighth-grader, Yulee’s principal came to the sideline to make sure Medley followed the rule. It was the first quarter.

As a junior, Henry and Ramsay met with then Florida coach Will Muschamp and defensive coordinator Dan Quinn. Ramsay assumed Henry would play tailback for the Gators, but Muschamp and Quinn liked Henry as a defender. So did plenty of other colleges. Those coaches stressed the money defensive ends and rush linebackers can make in an NFL that places the highest value on quarterbacks and the players who sack them. They pointed out the longer average careers of pass rushers compared with running backs. Henry didn’t care. He wanted to carry the ball.

Mark Richt preferred that Henry do that at Georgia, and Henry was prepared to, but Alabama didn’t give up. Eventually coach Nick Saban and running backs coach Burton Burns persuaded Henry that their pro-style offense perfectly suited his downhill style. Henry chose the Crimson Tide in a televised announcement on the morning of his



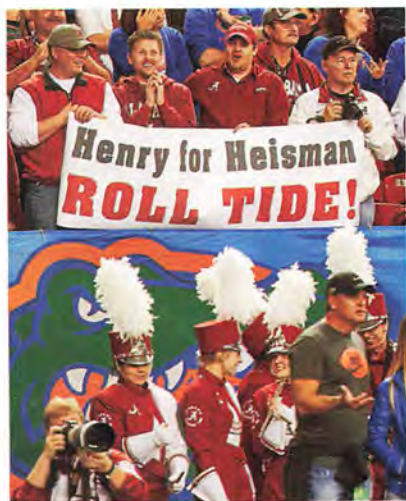
DEFLECTED GLORY

Emerging as a team leader after a strong 2014 season, the low-key Henry credits all his success to Alabama’s offensive line.

head-to-head showdown with future Florida back Kelvin Taylor, who played for Glades Day in Belle Glade, Fla. Then Henry outrushed Taylor 363 yards to 222 in a 42–6 Hornets win.

The two clashed again in the SEC title game, and Henry’s team again emerged victorious. Two years earlier Henry wondered if he’d chosen correctly in going to Tuscaloosa. The Tide had just concluded the regular season of his freshman year with an Iron Bowl loss to Auburn on the Kick Six, and for Christmas break he went home to Yulee (pop. 11,491), a dot between Jacksonville and the resorts of Amelia Island, where Georgians used to buy lottery tickets before their state





got a lottery of its own. During that visit Henry made clear that he was unhappy. After carrying only 27 times in his first 12 games, Henry poured out his frustration to his family and the high school coaches he considered family. Team Henry convened a meeting one night in Medley's kitchen. "He wasn't used to disappointment," says Pat Dunlap, another Yulee High assistant close to Henry. "He wasn't used to things not immediately going his way."

The coaches asked Henry if he had made his feelings known to Saban. Henry admitted he hadn't; he didn't want to seem like a whiner. They told him he needed to meet with Saban and Burns when he returned to Tuscaloosa and discuss his concerns like a man. Medley stressed that while uncomfortable, such conversations come with being an adult. "You're going to get a boss one day," Medley says. "You're going to need to be able to argue your point and sell yourself and your self-worth." Meanwhile, Henry's father urged him to return to campus with a good attitude. "We told him to stick it out," Derrick Sr. says. "You never know how things are going to turn out. Tough times don't last."

They didn't. Before Henry returned to school, Medley called ahead to apprise Saban and Burns. The Tide coaches were stunned to hear that Henry was unhappy. They said he had made exemplary



REPORTERS ASKED HENRY ABOUT HIS WORKLOAD. "THE BALL ISN'T THAT HEAVY," HE SAID.

progress as a freshman; in fact, he had practiced so well before the break that they intended to get Henry carries behind sophomore back T.J. Yeldon in the Sugar Bowl against Oklahoma. After meeting with Saban and Burns, Henry wound up carrying eight times for 100 yards and a touchdown in Alabama's 45-31 loss.

At that point Henry knew where he stood with the coaches. He gained 990 yards on 5.8 per carry as a sophomore, and after Alabama's Sugar Bowl loss to Ohio State, Henry knew the rest of the team looked to him as a leader. That's

why even on spring break in Panama City Beach, Fla., last March, Henry led teammates through workouts in the sand. "We were on the beach doing push-ups and sit-ups," senior linebacker Reggie Ragland says, smiling. "Just normal stuff, keeping our bodies fit for the girls." In the summer Henry posted Instagram videos of himself pushing Medley's Ford F-150 pickup and flipping tires. When he saw the videos on the news a few hours later, the attention-averse Henry took them down.

Henry was wise to prepare so thoroughly, because college was about to feel

a lot more like high school. Saban had planned to split carries in the 2015 season between Henry and senior Kenyan Drake, just as he had between Henry and Yeldon, Yeldon and Eddie Lacy, Lacy and Trent Richardson. Saban wants his runners to have fresh legs, and he uses his platoon system as a recruiting pitch, telling backs they won't endure too much wear on their way to the NFL. But with Henry running so well, he shouldered much of the load even before Drake broke his right arm against Mississippi State in Week 11. While outgaining LSU sophomore back Leonard Fournette 210

to 31 on Nov. 7, Henry carried 38 times—including 12 on the final possession when Alabama milked the final 9:18 off the clock. Against Auburn the Tide handed off to Henry 19 times in the fourth quarter. He finished with 271 yards, breaking Bo Jackson's Iron Bowl record on a career-high 46 totes. Those who know Henry back in Yulee say he needs at least 25 carries to get properly warmed up, and Alabama senior center Ryan Kelly marvels at Henry's ability to get stronger through the fourth quarter. "You think, This is probably starting to add up on his body a little bit, but he never shows it, never talks about it, never complains," Kelly says.

After the Auburn game, reporters asked Henry about his workload. "The ball isn't that heavy," he said. Henry had used a variation of that same line—first

made famous by USC coach John McKay in 1967—on Nov. 16, 2012, when he broke Hall's record. Ramsay's main concern that season was convincing opposing coaches and parents that his jumbo back belonged in high school. "The only person with a more controversial birth certificate was Barack Obama," Ramsay says.

The coach knew about Hall's mark but couldn't see how the math would work. Henry needed 3,369 yards as a senior. The problem solved itself: Without other options Ramsay had to keep feeding his big back. When Henry gained 455 yards in a November win against West Nassau High, he was in striking distance, and he broke through in Yulee's first playoff game, finishing the season with 4,261 yards and 55 touchdowns on 462 carries.

FACE VALUE

Henry didn't like how Saban used him as a freshman, but being named MVP of the SEC championship and then winning the Heisman Trophy made him smile.



HENRY'S INCREASED workload allowed him to break the SEC yardage record set by the platinum standard for SEC backs. Asked just how good Henry is, Ragland fires back, "He passed Herschel Walker, didn't he?" Henry broke Walker's record while playing in three more games than Walker played, but he did it on 39 fewer carries than Walker had in 1981.

And then, in mid-December, Henry replicated what Walker did in 1982, when he hoisted the Heisman Trophy. As his candidacy progressed, Henry asked his inner circle not to talk about the Heisman no matter how much reporters asked. In interviews he refused to take credit for his yardage—dishing it instead to his offensive line. "He's going to give all the credit to us," Kelly says, "but I'll give the credit to him." If Henry is indeed the locomotive his former tacklers claim him to be, he is carrying an entire offense on board. "I don't know that I've coached many players that actually set a better example to affect other people," Saban says. "He doesn't really do it for himself. He does it for them."

Just another way Henry makes a big impact. □



EMINENT FRONT

No defensive unit in the nation was more fearsome than Alabama's front seven

BY ZAC ELLIS

Photograph by
Vasha Hunt/AL.COM/Landov

KIRBY SMART has directed four national championship-winning defenses at Alabama, units that featured some of the most decorated defensive players in SEC history, including nine first-round NFL draft picks and 13 first-team All-Americans. Tuscaloosa has a long history of being a place where opposing offenses come to die, and that's been especially true in the eight years Smart has been the Tide's defensive coordinator.

Perhaps he was feeling nostalgic because this was his last Alabama team—Smart will be the head coach at Georgia next season—but on the eve of the College Football Playoff championship game the 40-year-old coach said he wouldn't rank any of his previous Bama defenses ahead of the 2015 squad, particularly the front seven. "We've never had one this deep," Smart said. "They can roll in and out and not drop off a lot. They take pride in that."

This year's unit finished third in the FBS in yards per play allowed (4.30). The key to that efficiency was Alabama's mountainous front seven, a relentless unit that helped the D finish second in the FBS against the run (2.43 yards per carry allowed). The Crimson Tide's defensive line and linebacker corps includes five players who returned as starters in 2015, a formidable group for whom camaraderie was as important as their brute strength. "This group is unique because they love each other so much," said Smart.

Who were the main cogs in that offense-stifling machine? These are the seven defenders who helped carry Alabama to its 11th consensus national title.

PICKUP ARTISTS

Allen (93) helped Reed (90) celebrate his fumble recovery during the first quarter of a 37-10 trouncing of Middle Tennessee State.

DILLON LEE

Sam Linebacker

DURING PRESEASON camp Smart referred to the 6' 4" senior from Buford, Ga., as "a man of many positions." It's true that Lee's versatility sets him apart in the back end of the Tide's front seven, where he has lined up at inside and outside linebacker over his four-year career. Last spring he earned the team's Sylvester Croom Commitment to Excellence Award for his effort on the field during workouts.

Lee isn't likely to blow up a box score—he finished with 27 tackles this season, including one sack and 1½ tackles for loss—but after making just one start in his previous three years, the Georgia native earned six in 2015. He led Bama's linebackers with two interceptions this season, including an acrobatic one-handed grab in the fourth quarter of the Cotton Bowl that helped preserve the shutout of Michigan State.

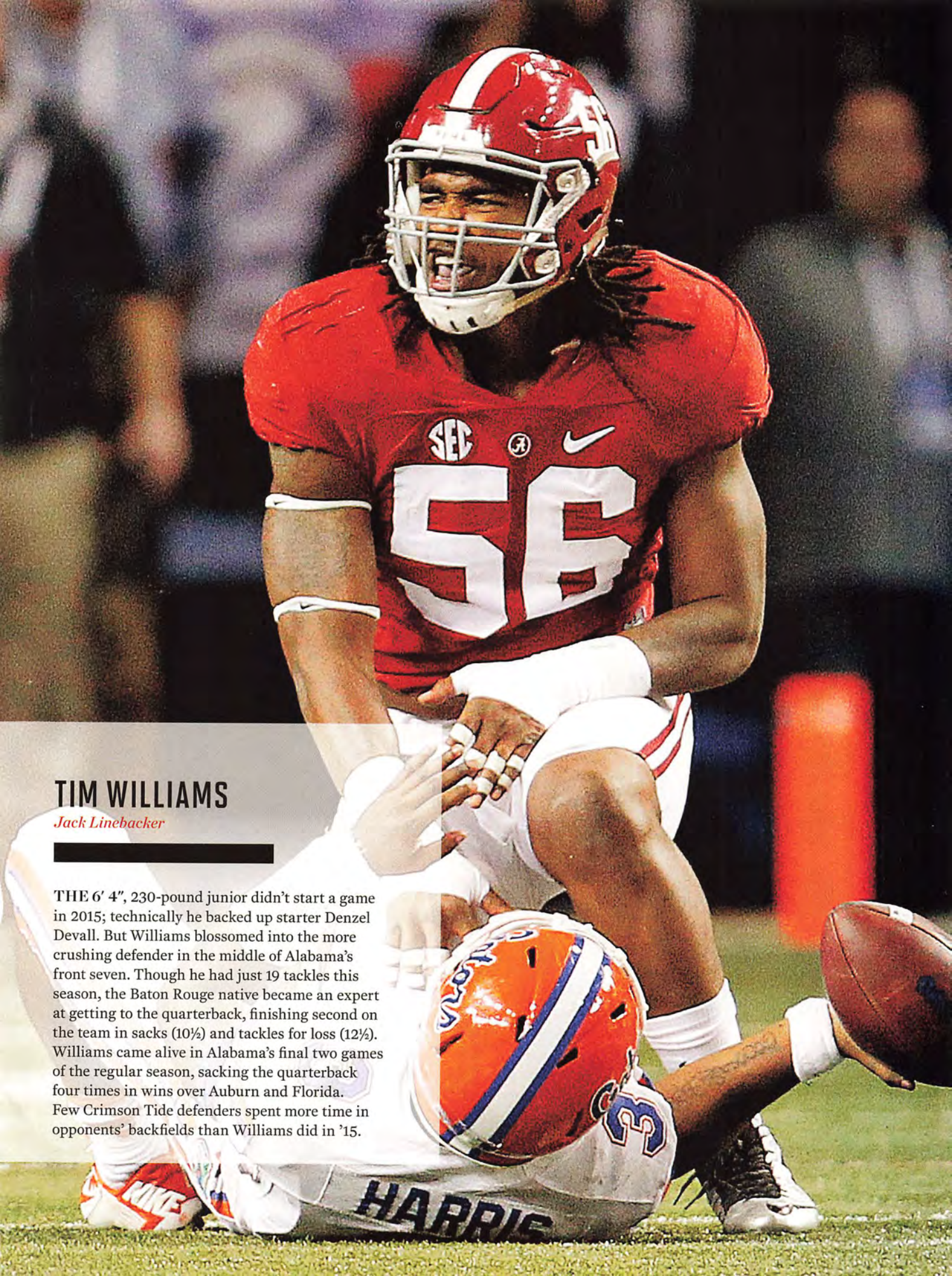


REUBEN FOSTER

Will Linebacker

AUBURN FANS likely haven't forgiven Foster, who flipped from the Tide to the Tigers during his recruitment and then flipped back to the Tide just before Signing Day in 2013. The nation's top-rated inside linebacker prospect then poured salt in the wounds of Auburn fans by donning a Nick Saban-style straw hat as he signed his letter of intent.

The 6' 1" junior made a big impact on the Tide's defense in 2015 after two seasons spent primarily on special teams. He finished second on the team in tackles (73) and made eight starts. Oh, and against Auburn, his hometown team, on Nov. 28? Foster made six tackles, earning team defensive player of the week honors as Alabama won the Iron Bowl for the 44th time. Roll Tide, indeed.

A full-page photograph of Alabama linebacker Tim Williams in his red jersey with the number 56. He is wearing a red helmet with a white facemask and is in a crouched, ready position on the field. The background is a blurred crowd of spectators.

TIM WILLIAMS

Jack Linebacker

THE 6' 4", 230-pound junior didn't start a game in 2015; technically he backed up starter Denzel Devall. But Williams blossomed into the more crushing defender in the middle of Alabama's front seven. Though he had just 19 tackles this season, the Baton Rouge native became an expert at getting to the quarterback, finishing second on the team in sacks (10½) and tackles for loss (12½). Williams came alive in Alabama's final two games of the regular season, sacking the quarterback four times in wins over Auburn and Florida. Few Crimson Tide defenders spent more time in opponents' backfields than Williams did in '15.

REGGIE RAGLAND

Mike Linebacker

THOUGH HE lines up on D, Ragland acts a lot like a QB. Denzel Devall calls him the Commander-in-Chief, and one of the senior's jobs this season was keeping Alabama's D aligned properly in the heat of games. He also made the most of his final season in Tuscaloosa, leading the Tide in tackles (102) while adding 2½ sacks and 6½ tackles for loss to earn first-team All-America honors.

The 6' 2", 252-pound Madison, Ala., native has been an impact player since his sophomore season. He participated in all 13 games in 2013 as a backup linebacker and on special teams. After the departure of C.J. Mosley, Ragland slid into the starting lineup the next year and became an All-SEC pick and a Butkus Award semifinalist. The senior flirted with the idea of leaving for the NFL draft, but by sticking around he provided leadership that was critical for the Tide to win the title.



JARRAN REED

Defensive Tackle

THE 6' 4" senior from Goldsboro, N.C., arrived in Tuscaloosa after winning a junior college national title as an all-region defender at East Mississippi Community College in 2013. That season Reed played on a defense that included current Alabama end D.J. Pettway and Ole Miss linebacker Christian Russell.

Reed started 13 games as a junior in '14, earning an All-SEC honorable mention. His 55 tackles last fall were the most by a Tide defensive lineman since Wallace Gilberry in '07. And he was even more effective during Bama's title run: As the team's emotional leader, Reed earned second-team All-SEC recognition and led all linemen with 57 tackles, adding eight quarterback hurries. His ability to puncture double teams is just one reason the D is so terrifying for opponents. "He's the backbone not just of our defense, but of our whole team," Jonathan Allen says.

JONATHAN ALLEN

Noseguard

ALLEN—A 6' 3", 283-pound behemoth—was Alabama's primary threat to break into an opponent's backfield this season. The junior has come a long way since high school, when he had to learn the basics of playing on the defensive line after switching from receiver at Stone Bridge High in Leesburg, Va.

This season Allen was one of Alabama's most disruptive defensive forces. A first-team All-SEC pick, he paced the Crimson Tide with 14½ tackles for loss and 12 sacks. In a 41-23 victory at Texas A&M on Oct. 17, Allen had four tackles for loss, two sacks and a forced fumble, and he helped seal a 19-14 win over Tennessee on Oct. 14 with a key sack of Volunteers quarterback Josh Dobbs on UT's final drive. Allen managed to wreak havoc on opposing QBs despite suffering a left shoulder injury against Louisiana-Monroe on Sept. 26.



A'SHAWN ROBINSON

Defensive End

THE ANCHOR of Alabama's line was the freakishly athletic 6' 4", 312-pound Robinson. The junior is so agile, in fact, that he blocked an extra point attempt during Alabama's 30-16 win over LSU on Nov. 7 by jumping completely over the head of the Tigers' long snapper. Robinson boasts a 32-inch vertical leap and has been dunking a basketball since the seventh grade.

The former five-star prospect from Arlington Heights (Texas) High originally committed to Texas, but he flipped to Alabama just before National Signing Day in 2013. Robinson earned freshman All-America honors that fall despite only starting twice. This season Robinson regularly attracted double teams yet tied for the team lead in quarterback hurries (10) while adding 7½ tackles for loss, including 3½ sacks. He's a big reason why Alabama held 14 of 15 of its opponents to at least 50 yards below their season rushing average in '15.



A

THE LAST SHOT

GOOD HANDS PEOPLE

Redshirt freshman Marlon Humphrey, who grabbed a crucial fourth-quarter onside kick, celebrated with fans after the game.

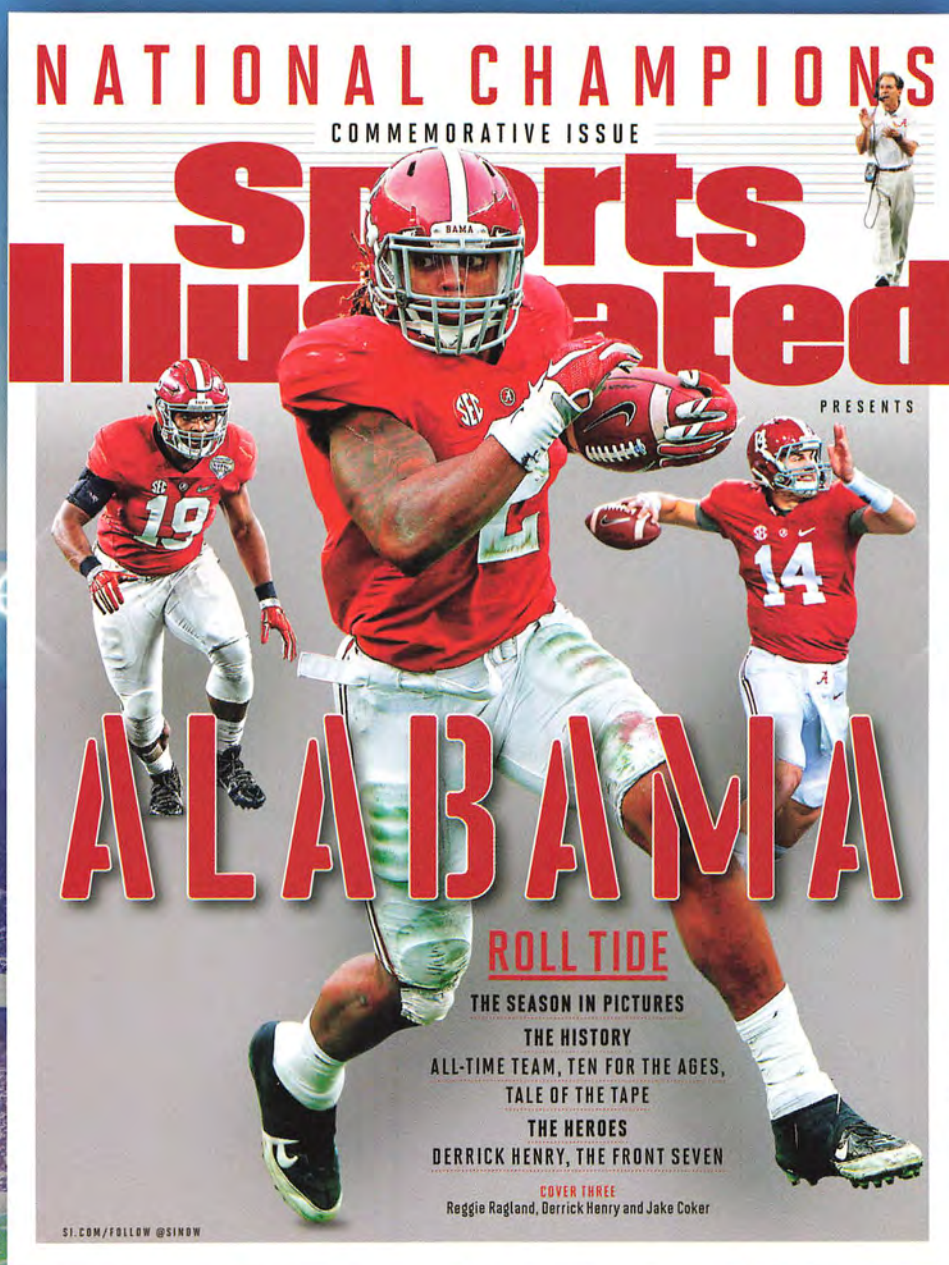


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As a naval aviator, test pilot and astronaut, Mark Kelly has been recognized for his courage and determination. A true pioneer, he appreciates the innovation, craftsmanship and utility of the Exospace B55, the first Breitling connected chronograph. This multifunction electronic instrument, powered by an exclusive COSC chronometer-certified caliber, reinvents the connected watch by dedicating it to the service of aviation professionals. Performance, functionality, and reliability. Welcome to the world of tomorrow's technology. Welcome to our world.

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